ADA 31 Force Heretic: Book 1

Thirty-One
)-(I)-(

"*You did not have to join uz in this hunt.*"

"I know, Saba," Eighteen year-old Jedi Knight, Anakin Solo, said over the comm-channel of his X-wing. "But Tesar and his sisters helped me out on the mission to Myrkr, it wouldn't have succeeded without their help. I could only bring Tesar back to you so it seems only fair that I repay you somehow."

"And I couldn't let Anakin go off by himself. Besides, Tesar's a good friend too," Tahiri added perkily. Flying with them was the rest of Barefoot squadron, who were currently all on leave to assist their squadron commander. The losses they had taken at Ebaq 9 had only brought them closer, and they had become like a second family to the sixteen year-old Jedi Knight.

"It's what friends are for." Jaina said, her tone also light. The burden of being the Sword of the Jedi was not as great as she had feared it would be. She was a single sword, but she did not stand alone. Her brothers, her friends, all fought along at her side, sharing that burden with her. Though she was still worried about losing friends and family to the war, she had developed a fairly positive outlook given their recent successes.

Promoted after the battle of Ebaq 9, the now *Colonel* Jaina Solo had spent more time in the *Trickster* riling up Yuuzhan Vong garrisons than in her X-wing. Even on their present mission, she was flying not in the cockpit of her snubfighter, but within the confines of the alien frigate. The time spent onboard had enabled her to develop a deeper respect and understanding for the Yuuzhan Vong with whom she worked with on a daily basis. Apart from her original Freed One crew, new additions had been added in light of the recent victories.

The multitude of Yuuzhan Vong who had defected after Ebaq 9 had all been interrogated by Galactic Alliance Intelligence and the Freed Ones, and were all cleared to serve alongside the New Republic forces. This meant that the *Trickster* was now equipped with a full crew, rather than a skeleton one, as well as two units of Yuuzhan Vong warriors.

In a surprise move, even the non-Yuuzhan Vong commando unit that had also been assigned to the *Trickster* had agreed to participate in their unofficial mission to the Barab system. It was later learned that many of the commandos were the same ones who had trained on Borleias with the initial group of Freed Ones and had grown used to operating with the Yuuzhan Vong.

Also among the non-Force sensitives taking part in their little adventure was a certain Clawcraft pilot, who was going along with their crazy mission to ensure the safety of the Yuuzhan Vong frigate's deified Jedi captain. Jag and Anakin had been more than amused when Jaina and Tahiri assigned the two of them as wingmates. They certainly were an odd pair, a Clawcraft and an X-wing, but they were also a good team. So much so that Jagged had commented to Anakin early on that his flying style was similar to Jaina's—skilled recklessness.

Rounding out the *Trickster's* crew was Zekk, Tesar, and Lowbacca. All on leave after spending the month post-Ebaq 9 taking advantage of the power vacuum within the Yuuzhan Vong ranks and helping the Galactic Alliance forces secure more ground. It had been a dirty and tiresome job, but someone had to do it; and for some reason, the higher ups all seemed to think that the Jedi Knights would be perfect for it. Never mind that they had just survived the stressful events of Ebaq 9. After the end of the month, however, the High Council had finally drawn the line and given all of the recently made Knights and their friends some much needed time off.

Some, though, had taken the leave with the utmost of reluctance due to the current state of the galaxy—which probably explained why the group had decided to visit a possible Yuuzhan Vong-held world for their leave instead of one of the many other tourist-themed planets in the safer parts of the galaxy.

"*Friends look out for each other, Saba,*" Jaina continued.

"*If there's Yuuzhan Vong where there shouldn't be, Jedi Sebatyne, we'll have to deal with them eventually.*" Barefoot Seven, Zindra Daine chimed in. *"Might as well take them out before they can hurt anyone else."*

Silence, and then Saba said in a kind tone. *"You all have this one'z thankz. It iz more than likely that the bad feeling this one feelz is just nerves. It is Reswa's passage into adulthood and I have alwayz been close to my hatchmatez."*

The small, unofficial task force, all using their much deserved leave for the unofficial mission, dropped out of hyperspace above Barab I. Rather than a serene sphere of green and white, basking in the faint rays of the Barab system's red sun, the sight that greeted them was not like anything they had expected.

Barab I was burning. Thick black smoke completely consumed the planet's atmosphere, illuminated a hellish red by the magma flows and fires burning beneath. Swirls within the choking clouds revealed where harsh winds were whipping across blackened ground, sending scalding bursts of gases and flame across the length of the glassed planet.

Saba Sebatyne's anguish and panic through the Force was felt by the other Jedi as they made a fly-by over the planet.
"This iz Saba Sebatyne. If anyone can hear this broadcast, please respond." Seconds ticked by with no response. Saba's voice grew more desperate as she tried again. *"Anyone! Reswa! Please, respond!"*
Everyone shifted uncomfortably at the silence that continued in answer. They had all seen planets conquered and ravaged by the Yuuzhan Vong before, but when it was the home of someone they considered a good friend, the pain of losing that planet was sharper.
"Heads up Bantha Taskforce," Jaina's voice cut in over Saba's despair. *"Coralskippers coming out of the planet. According to Liir, there are four of them. She says the gravity profile suggests that the skips are escorting a slave transport. A massive one at that."*
Anger mixed with grief flashed from Saba.
"This is Bantha Lead," Anakin said quickly. "If that transport sees us, it's likely to dump its cargo."
It was a grim experience and helpless experience for many pilots, watching overwhelmed slave ships dump the captured individuals into the cold of space rather than allow them to be rescued.
"What do you recommend, Little Brother?"
"Do what you do best on that ship." Anakin answered. "Get close enough and bluff your way onto it. When you give the signal, the rest of us will swoop in and finish off the coralskippers."
"I copy."
"Barefoots, hang back."
"Affirmative leader."
"Saba," Anakin said softly. "I know you want to check your planet for survivors, but let's take care of these last Vong first."
"Thiz one…agreez." The words were said with great effort. The other Jedi did their best to comfort their distraught friend. But seeing her home, the place where her family and friends lived, burning before her eyes, was almost too much for the Barabel Jedi Knight. Barabels were close-knit socially. To think that everyone she had known and cared for was dead nearly overwhelmed her with grief.
The rest of the task force waited behind one of Barab I's moons, Jaina continuously updating them on their progress.
"We've successfully gained permission to board the ship. It's a good thing my crew's Yuuzhan Vong. It's my first time seeing something like this one, I doubt I would have called it a slaveship. Airlock sealed. Lowie and Zekk are leading the charge…" Seconds ticked by. And then, *"We have control of the ship. Go! Go! Go!"*

The nine X-wings of Barefoot Squadron, plus Anakin, Jagged, and Saba's fighter, peeled away and zoomed towards the four escorting coralskippers. The alien fighters never stood a chance. In a heartbeat, all four were blazing balls of fire, spiraling back down to the molten surface of the planet that they had helped create.
Saba's fighter continued down into the atmosphere of the planet, anxious to see the state of her home city. The other fighters followed, a somber feeling settling as they watched the city burn to the ground. Parts of it had been reduced to pits of bubbling magma, while craters marked the location of the spaceport and other central buildings.
"Thiz one should have been here," Saba's anguish filled voice came over the comm.
"There was nothing you could have done," Jaina said softly. *"And on the bright side, there were over three thousand of your people onboard the slave-ship we captured."*
"Saba," Zekk's voice came over the comm. *"One of those we rescued is asking for you. She says her name is Reswa"*
Hope and deliriously happy relief flared from the worried Barabel.
"Please, put her on."
"Saba?"
"Reswa, you live!" The others couldn't help but smile at the joyful tone of Saba's voice.
"I am glad that the Jedi came to our aid."
"They are my friendz, my dear Reswa," Saba said, broadcasting an immeasurable amount of gratefulness to the others. *"And what of the rest of our family?"*
"Most live. Though many were already taken off planet by other shipz. Thiz ship waz the last."
"We will find them, then," Saba said with determination. *"We will not let our people be sacrificed."*
"And we'll help," Jaina said firmly. *"Is there anything left on the planet that you'd like to salvage? It doesn't look like the Yuuzhan Vong will be coming back any time soon."*
"Some," Reswa said. *"We will try to save what we can. But Barab I...itz joined the fate of Coruscant."*
"I'm sorry we couldn't get here sooner," Anakin swallowed.
"It iz alright, Little Brother," Saba said. *"We have saved who we could, and we will be pursuing the others. Az your sister said, we could not have done much more were we here earlier."*
"We'll escort the slave-ship back down to the planet. While your people tie up any loose ends, we'll contact the Galactic Federation and let them know that Barab I needs assistance."

"Thank you Jaina."
"Don't worry, Saba. Your people are strong. We'll rescue the others," Anakin said firmly.
"That is something I never doubted." The strength and confidence had returned to her voice as the Barabel Knight flew alongside the balloon-like slave-transport. *"Thank you all for giving me a chance to see this one'z family again."*
)-(II)-(
"And I thought we had a complicated society," Doran Sarkin-Tainer said, putting down the datapad and whistling. "Let's see if I got it right. Blue scales are the rulers, gold are the priests, yellow the scientists, and brown are the muscle. And then there are also the P'w'eck, a slave race used by the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium; kind of genetically related to the Ssi-ruuk."
"That's right," Sannah answered from her bunk. "And entechment is?"
"The art," Doran made a face at that. "Of pulling the life force out of people and cramming them into machines. The minds of the people continue to suffer as they are forced to work the fighters and other vehicles of the Imperium. The last major conflict was almost twenty years ago, the Imperium hasn't been heard from since."
"So we're flying towards a planet that might be under attack by soul-stealing aliens from the Unknown Regions," Sannah shuddered. "Are you *trying* to copy Anakin Solo and take me on a date to some ridiculously dangerous place?"
"Would you rather we didn't go?"
Sannah grinned. "No way. If I'm going to spend the rest of my life swimming around in the waters of Yavin Eight, I wanna know what the rest of this galaxy is like first. Next question, what's the primary religion practiced by those on Bakura?"
"Something called the 'Balance,'" Doran recited dutifully. "If something good happens somewhere in the galaxy, something bad is happening elsewhere. Jedi are bad because their power upsets the Balance and constantly ensures that only misfortune occurs to those around them. Now your turn. Let's go back to the Ssi-ruuk. What's the Imperium government like?"
"Clan-based," Sannah recited. "The…umm…Shreeftut is the supreme leader. He is advised by the Elders' Council and the Conclave."
"And the Conclave does what?"
"Errr…" Sannah glanced back down at her datapad. "They handle spiritual matters. Both the Ssi-ruuk and P'w'eck are highly religious peoples. They believe that if they die away from a consecrated world, their souls would be lost forever. It's why the entechment tech was

created in the first place, so the Ssi-ruuk wouldn't have to risk their own lives."
"Correct, though minus a point for looking at your datapad."
"Picky, picky," Sannah stuck her tongue out at him. Doran retaliated by throwing his pillow at her. With which she promptly added to her bunk. "Thanks, I could always use a second pillow."
Doran made a sad face, and Sannah rolled her eyes and gave him his pillow back.
"Get ready kids, we'll be coming out of hyperspace in five minutes."
The two teens glanced at each other and swallowed worriedly. "Hey, if I get crammed into one of…"
"It's not going to happen, Sannah," Doran said firmly. "I won't let anything happen to you."
Sannah blushed at the tone of his voice. "Fine. So long as you don't get yourself entecheed either. I don't want to think about your soul being in prolonged torment."
"We don't even know what's happening at Bakura," Doran wrapped his arms around Sannah for a brief hug. "Maybe we'll get lucky. You know, the Force told us to go here because the leader got turned into a robot by the Ssi-ruuk and he blew a gasket, threatening the peace of the region. So all we have to do is turn a few bolts, or something easy like that."
Sannah lightly pushed him away, smiling. "'Turned into a robot'? You and your crazy ideas. I think you've been on one too many adventures, Adventure Boy. Solar radiation must have fried your brain."
"Hyperspace reversion in four minutes."
Doran reached over to the inter-ship comm. "Coming mom."
"Well, Mr. Tainer, shall we go see what adventure is in store for us this time?" Sannah offered a bent arm to her friend.
"Of course, Sannah," Doran took the arm and they walked back towards the cockpit. "We Jedi live and breathe adventure after all."
)-(III)-(
Tenel Ka was a picture of contentment as she sat in the shade of a picturesque grove of silver trees. Delicate purple and pink flower petals drifted lackadaisically all around in the gentle breeze as leaves of midnight blue, springing out from the lattice work of silver branches, provided a perfect cover from the heat of the noon sun sitting high in a dazzling clear azure sky. The view beyond the shaded copse was just as breathtaking; an idyllic expanse of indigo-shaded snow-capped mountains and a sprawling networks of rivers cutting through lands of many shades of green.

For once there was no urgency, no pressing matter she had to attend to. Instead of her normally intense grey eyes and steely features, necessary for dealing with the daily demands required of the Queen Mother, her eyes were soft and gentle as she absently ran her hand through Jacen's hair with the fondest of expressions.

He was asleep, at peace in the Force. His presence attuned to the abundance of wildlife around them and in perfect sync with her own. This was the last day of their two-week time together, two weeks she had sorely needed. As strong as she was, the daily grindings of politics and assassination attempts had been taking a toll on her.

The Hapan Palace was simply a cold and calculating place, where friends were targeted as perceived weaknesses and enemies were always willing to help with fake smiles and gestures of subservience. Though most people saw her as cold a person, someone who didn't let annoying things like emotion affect her decisions, that couldn't have been further from the truth. Tenel Ka missed her friends dearly, having become accustomed to the constant presence of the bonds she shared with them and camaraderie that had surrounded her as she was growing up. They had gone through so much together and she would have traded all of Hapes just to have one more day with them, to spend one more day as Tenel Ka the Jedi Knight and not as Queen Mother.

Of course, above all, she had missed Jacen, her best and closest friend. The two weeks with him had been something out of a dream for Tenel Ka. Just the two of them in the *Rock Dragon*, jetting off to the most beautifully scenic places in her kingdom, without a single worry in the galaxy. In those two weeks he had become more and more like the Jacen she remembered, telling jokes, looking distressed at her own purposefully awful jokes, spending time admiring and playing with the various animals they encountered…spending time with her.

It was just she and Jacen on a world untouched by the ravages of war, the nearest sentient being lightyears away. They didn't have to wear a mask, pretend to be strong, to be the great leaders everyone wanted them to be.

Everyone *needed* them to be.

They could just be themselves. And for the first time in a very long while, they could simply pretend that everything was right in the galaxy.

There was no doubt that their bond, already very strong, had become even stronger during the two weeks.

Though the trip was completely enjoyable in every way, the moment she knew she would never forget occurred during the first day of the

second week. With a spectacular night-time meteor shower as a backdrop and their mountain-side camp around them, she and Jacen had shared their first real kiss. It was soft and gentle, and everything Tenel Ka had hoped it would be and more. The rest of the night was spent holding hands and leaning against each other, simply basking in their Force bond. When the meteor shower was over, they fell asleep at each other's sides under the glittering, diamond-filled night's sky. Neither were very big at sharing their feelings, their relationship having always leaned towards a more intellectual bond than a physical one, yet that one kiss had said what a thousand words couldn't. And though they hadn't shared another kiss since then, they *had* grown accustomed to falling asleep at each other's side.

Tenel Ka made a mental note to reward her loyal retainer, Jana, for packing in the most fun as was possible in those ten days, and for setting the mood for that memorable night. Jana, an orphan taken in by Teneniel, was just as loyal to Tenel Ka as she had been to the previous Queen Mother, and was one of the few people outside of the Zel twins that Tenel Ka even trusted.

And Tenel Ka was definitely grateful that she had.

The brief respite from her queenly duties had only made Tenel Ka realize just how much she had missed Jacen, and how much she would miss him now that their sojourn away from any duties and responsibilities was drawing to a close. She sighed softly, continuing to gently run her hand through Jacen's hair. There was no end to the worry she had for him and her friends out fighting a seemingly unwinnable war. At least, in these last few moments alone together, she could personally see to his safety and happiness.

There was a small chirp, and the comlink she had brought with her glowed softly. Tilting her head, Tenel Ka used the Force to trap the sound of her voice and answered the call.

"Yes?"

"*Queen Mother, this is Jana. A Jedi Knight Vergere is attempting to make contact with Jedi Knight Solo. She claims it to be important.*"

Tenel Ka reflexively placed her hand protectively on her best friend. After a moment and a slow breath, she raised her comlink again. "Put her through."

"*Yes, Your Highness.*"

There was a small pause, and then a voice that always caused Tenel Ka to tense in suspicion, came through. *"Jacen?"*

"Hello Vergere," Tenel Ka said stiffly. "Jacen is sleeping at the moment, what do you want?"

"*Ah, I am talking to the Queen Mother of Hapes, then?*"

"You are correct."
"*You are far too young to be so angry and tense all the time,"* Vergere chided. *"Is it wrong for a master to want to speak with her student? I have not had much contact with him since I was detained here on Mon Calamari, and I was worried for him."*
"Jacen is fine," Tenel Ka replied, keeping her replies curt.
"*That is good. It is good to know that someone besides myself truly cares for his well-being."*
"Meaning?"
"*Meaning that Jacen isn't living up to his full potential. At the rate he's going, he'll be left behind by his brother, by his sister, by everyone, and pass into irrelevance. I assume he is training with you to better himself?"*
Tenel Ka's copper eyebrows narrowed. "Assume what you will, Vergere. Believe whatever you wish."
Vergere sighed audibly. *"Queen Mother, I am sure you are not as short-sighted as to be unable see Jacen's potential. To know what he is capable of. Do you truly wish to get in the way of his destiny, to tie him down to a life where he'll only be treated as a second-class citizen, all because of your selfish emotions? As much as you want your childhood fantasies to come true, you know that they must stay fantasies. Do not interfere with my training and teaching of Jacen Solo. The consequences will be most severe."*
"A threat?" Tenel Ka growled.
"No my dear Queen Mother. I would never dream of threatening someone of your status," Vergere said patronizingly. *"Just know that you and he are not meant to be, that your destinies lie elsewhere."*
"I will create my own destiny, Vergere. As will Jacen," Tenel Ka remarked darkly. "We will not have one dictated to us."
"And look how well it turned out last time," Vergere chortled. *"You ended up on the throne instead of remaining a Jedi with the rest of your friends, and Jacen found me."*
Tenel Ka glared at the comlink. "If I ever discover Jacen has come to harm from your teachings, there will be no place in this galaxy you'll be able to hide."
"And if you continue to believe the foolish notion that you can carve out your own fate, there will be no place in the galaxy safe for <u>you</u>. You are letting your insignificant emotions cloud this issue, Queen Mother. The Jedi of old banned attachments for this very reason. Use your head..."
"Goodbye, Vergere," Tenel Ka seethed, shutting off the comlink and cutting off the Fosh Force user.

Jacen stirred and looked up from her lap. "Tenel Ka?"
"Go back to sleep, Jacen," Tenel Ka said softly.
"You were angry."
"Simply some nobles who bullied Jana into contacting me," Tenel Ka forced darker emotions away. "Part of the job. Sleep, my friend." *For as long as I can help it, you will be safe.*
)-(IV)-(
"Like I said before," Ganner said, doing his best to stay calm. He was in a holding cell speaking through a forcefield. After waiting around in his ruined apartment, as requested, he had been arrested the moment the stormtroopers arrived. And then they had left him stewing for the past couple of weeks in a jail cell without any visitors. When he had finally been moved to another facility, his situation really hadn't improved much. The past several hours had been spent answering the same questions over and over again. "The commander dropped me off and I was attacked by a Vong after I entered my apartment. I didn't see her afterwards."
"If that was true, where is the Yuuzhan Vong that attacked you?"
"I threw him out the window."
"There was no sign of any body on the ground. And you had your lightsaber, why didn't you use that?"
"The Vong ambushed me and knocked *it* out the window too."
"Again, there was no sign of any lightsaber at street level," his interrogator said. "You should know that we don't take kindly to liars. Especially if they are Rebel scum such as yourself. You only hurt yourself more by continuing your charade."
"Look, I don't know what happened to Commander Dorja after she dropped me off. The first I heard of her death was when I tried calling her comlink!" Ganner half-shouted. "Besides, why would I stick around for your people to arrest me if I was the killer? Why would I even kill her in the first place?"
"I am asking the questions, Jedi."
"Right, and you've been doing such a good job of it."
"The facts are clear. Commander Dorja's body bore wounds similar to that inflicted by a lightsaber. Your lightsaber is conveniently missing. You were the last one to be seen with the commander. In fact multiple people saw you kiss in front of the Imperial Headquarters. You claim to have been fighting a Yuuzhan Vong when she died, yet there was no body where you said there would be. What was it, Jedi? She wouldn't betray the Empire for you so you got angry? Perhaps she had another suitor and you killed her in a jealous rage. You were seen in a romantic embrace shortly before her death, was it an affair gone awry?"

"I don't know how much clearer I can be! I did not *sleep* with that woman!" Ganner snapped in frustration. "I did not *kill* that woman."
"If you do not want to help yourself, then I cannot help you." The interrogator snapped his briefcase together. "This was your last chance to save yourself. You are scheduled to be executed at first light tomorrow."
"What? What about a trial?"
"You are not a citizen of the Empire. Worse, you took advantage of our hospitality and killed one of our most promising agents. At most, you would have gone before a military tribunal. But as current galactic events have forced us to refocus our resources, and the evidence against you is clear, we saw no need for one."
"*You* saw no need. *I* happen to see a very great need. What of your relations with the New Republic?"
"I highly doubt your government would wish to get on the Empire's bad side. They are in a precarious enough position as it is. It is far more likely they will let the execution happen just to save face."
"Don't I at least get to contact someone?"
"Your final meal will arrive in an hour," the interrogator ignored Ganner's question. "I suggest you make peace with whatever deity you Jedi believe in."
The interrogator left, leaving Ganner alone in his cell. The Jedi pounded the nearby wall in frustration. "Just great! This situation keeps getting worse all the time."
A stormtrooper stopped in front of the forcefield holding up a grey, prison jumpsuit. "Strip and change into this."
Ganner obeyed the command at blaster point, glaring at the trooper as he pulled his head through the head-hole of the jumpsuit. "What's next? You want me to ride a unicycle and put on clown shoes while I'm at it?"
The trooper obviously had no sense of humor. "From this point forth, you are Prisoner Eleven-Thirty-Eight. You will refer to yourself as Prisoner Eleven-Thirty-Eight until such time you are executed. Is that clear, Prisoner Eleven-Thirty-Eight?"
"Perfectly," Ganner said mutinously. The guard left. Ganner sagged back into the metal chair in his cell and groaned. "And to think I only came here to purchase one of those snazzy uniforms from the gift shop."
)-(V)-(
Sitting in one of Mon Calamari's newer nightclubs, Alema ignored the thumping music and flashing lights in the background. As the center of government, Mon Calamari had seen a boom in the number of new

businesses and social areas in the past few months. There were also just as many places to go if one didn't feel social and wanted to stay out of the way.
The lighting of the bar was dim and the bar itself was full of dark corners. A mixture of smoke and steam constantly lingered in the air, with bright colored strobe lights pulsating all around a small stage. Several busy barmen waited on hooded or helmeted patrons, while scantily clad dancers performed on the stage to the blaring music. Alema spent the time just watching the dancers and nursing her drink. It seemed so long ago, another life. To think that she had once been in their outfits, dancing for the pleasure of others was almost unbelievable.
Well, her and Numa.
Strangely enough, Alema found that Numa's name didn't invoke the usual rage and anger towards the galaxy that it once had. She glanced at the empty glass in her hands, wondering if alcohol was to blame. She glanced up at a HoloNet broadcast and a more likely culprit was found.
The news report was regaling the exploits of one Anakin Solo, portraying him as a galaxy-mover, a hero—one who could bring a galaxy plunged into darkness back into the light. Maybe her anger wasn't as pronounced because of him. He had forced her to constantly relive the anguish of her sister's death by telling various media outlets during his trial back on Hapes. Even now, she could change the channel and still see Numa's name among the many in some silent memorial to the dead. Anakin had made sure that Numa wouldn't be forgotten, that she hadn't died in vain.
Immediately after Numa's death, the other masters had often told her that she needed to talk to someone in order to help her deal with the loss of her sister. She had ignored them. Who would want to listen to her anyways? It wasn't like she was close to any of the other Jedi. Little did she suspect that, several months later, Anakin would have her telling complete strangers what it was like for her to lose her sister. What it was like to fight without any recognition. Why she continued the fight despite everything. It had been oddly therapeutic.
Where all the other masters had failed to get her to open up about her feelings, Anakin had succeeded. And now Numa was a hero in the eyes of many.
Alema gestured for the barkeep to refill her glass. Numa was a hero and Anakin had lessened the pain she felt at her sister's death. Sure, if she really tried, she could feel anger towards the Vong. But then, Tahiri, another person Alema considered a friend, was part Vong and

had Vong friends. It was for both Tahiri and Anakin's sake that Alema had made the effort to talk with Shaeri; or in her own mind, Tahiri's Vong kid-sister. The conversations hadn't exactly made the young Vong a friend, but it had taken away a good portion of the remaining rage Alema felt towards the alien invaders.

On the asteroid where she and Anakin had trained, Alema had been taught to use her anger and rage, her despair at surviving when her sister hadn't, to enhance her own abilities. But since arriving on Mon Cal and actually making friends with Tahiri, learning to see the galaxy as the blond teen did, Alema found that she could no longer call upon her rage so easily. It was just taking too much effort to hate the Vong as she did before. And she wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing.

"Kriffing Solo," Alema grumbled, downing the refilled glass and motioning for the barkeep again. "I was perfectly happy angry and miserable."

"Hey, don't talk about the Solos that way!" A drunk patron next to her blurted. He was easily thrice her size width-wise and several heads taller.

Alema gave him a half-hooded stare. "I can talk about 'em however I want. Those stupid busybodies."

"They killed the warmaster of those scar-heads!" The patron said, pushing a finger into Alema's arm. "I won't let you disrespect them in front of me."

"You and who else?" Alema drawled loudly. This caused several other patron to break off beer bottles on the countertop and crack their knuckles menacingly. "Great, all of you are going to defend that dunderhead Anakin Solo who always sticks his nose where it doesn't belong?"

The drunken patron in front of her swung at her. She deftly grabbed his wrist and sent him flying over the bar. His large form crashed into a shelf and brought down a whole row of bottles onto his limp form.

The others immediately charged, the heavy pulsating rhythm in the background—coupled with the flashing strobe lights—helped add to the atmosphere as the patrons began to fly all over the place.

And Alema finally grinned.

Now this was more like it.

)-(VI)-(

"And tell me why I'm bailing you out of jail, again?" Very patient senior Jedi Knight, Corran Horn, said in disbelief.

"Because you're a great guy?" Alema purred.

Corran continued to stare at Alema with great incredulity. "Whatever possessed you to get involved in a bar-fight in the first place?"

"Hey, I was only defending myself. Besides, it was sixteen to one and I won this time. And that was without any Force powers," Alema said with a note of pride and two black eyes. "Now, unless you have a thing for shackled Jedi, are you going to take off these binders?" She held out her wrists. "I'm really not a handcuff sorta gal. Well, not unless you want me to be."
"You're still drunk," Corran raised an eyebrow as he deactivated the restraints.
"Even if I wasn't, would you be able to tell?" Alema said with pouting lips as she rubbed at her wrists. "Besides, it's always more fun to tempt the married ones."
"Barring what Mirax would do to me if I ever cheated on her, you're a bit too young for me," Corran said with a shake of his head. He reached out and placed a hand on her head.
Alema shuddered, then pouted for a different reason as the happy buzz disappeared. "Did you really have to do that?"
"Alema," Corran said with disproval. "This is the second time in the past week. Fifth in the past two weeks. The last time you stole several speeders from a senator and drove each of them off the senate building and into the ocean. When you were arrest you said you testing out their aerodynamic and underwater capabilities."
"He had it coming. He had a whole garage full of speeders from all the bribes he'd been taking. That money could have been used to help hundreds of others."
"The time before that you nearly overdosed on glitterstim."
"'Nearly' being the operative word. I was trying to infiltrate that drug ring responsible for the rise in glitterstim addicts among the refugees here. Not my fault things didn't go as planned."
"And that time last week, when you stormed that illegal brothel all by yourself, brought down the seven-story warehouse the brothel was located in, and spent the following two days in a bacta tank on the verge of death?"
"Compared to those three times, a bar fight doesn't seem all that bad now, does it?"
"Alema, I'm trying to give you the benefit of the doubt, but there's only so much I can hide from the council or Master Skywalker. What's wrong?"
Alema looked out over the churning waves, her cheery expression fading. It was a cloudy night on Mon Calamari so the waters all looked black. "Is it wrong to be angry when your friends are happy?"
"Alema?"
Alema shook her head. "Never mind."

Corran reached out and caught her arm before she could leave. "Not 'never mind'."
"It's alright Jedi Knight Horn. Thanks for bailing me out," Alema tried to free her arm, but Corran held firm.
"Alema, I won't give up on you." Corran's voice was soft and understanding. "Can I make a guess as to what you're feeling?"
"Sure," Alema shrugged listlessly, turning to stare back out at the ocean.
"I'll start with a little story first," Corran said. "One day, back while I was in CorSec, my father and I were working a joint op. What we didn't expect though, was for a bounty hunter to come in and shoot the place up. My father died in the attack, in my arms, and the bounty hunter escaped. I grieved for a bit, putting some of the blame on my shoulders. If I had moved fast enough, maybe covered my dad's body with my own, if I had seen the bounty hunter coming, then maybe my dad would be alive. It wasn't long before I got angry. Really angry. I spent a good portion of time tracking down leads, trying to find the bounty hunter and the one who hired him."
"Did you find him?"
"Yes and no. I found the bounty hunter, even hauled him in, but my superior released him citing lack of evidence. It was at that moment that I realized several things." Corran joined Alema in gazing out at the moving sea. "Once the bounty hunter was released I realized that I had used up all my hate and anger. Sure I was frustrated and mad as heck at the bounty hunter's release, but I wasn't actually angry at the bounty hunter anymore. I had spent so much time hating the bounty hunter and whoever hired him that I had worn myself out. So I captured the bounty hunter? Where did that get me? Even if I killed him, it still wouldn't have brought my dad back, and I know my dad wouldn't have approved of me for doing it. So here I was, a CorSec officer with no family, no apparent future, and empty after all that time spent hating and searching for justice. I saw others around me getting on with their life. Several officers I knew in CorSec even got married while I was out searching for that bounty hunter. These officers, I suppose you could call them friends, had invited me to their weddings. Yet, after I was done tracking the bounty hunter, I looked them up and realized that the happiness I felt for them was hollow. Why were they allowed to have a family when my own was taken away? How dare they be happy when my dad was dead? I had gotten the murderer, yet I was empty and jealous of those who I thought were good friends."
"What did you do?" Alema whispered.

Corran held Alema's gaze. "After talking with my grandfather, I decided that I needed a change of scenery and left. I flew around for a bit, eventually joined the Rebellion and learned about my past. It also connected me a lot more to my father than I thought it would."
Alema nodded slowly. "I'll keep that in mind."
"I know you're friends with Anakin and Tahiri," Corran said carefully.
Alema closed her eyes and smiled briefly. "Yeah."
"I've noticed the affects they had on you. You're less angry, more controlled."
"Definitely their fault," Alema agreed.
"And once that anger was gone…"
"I was left with nothing," Alema finished brokenly, a single tear escaping her cheek. "Numa was my only family. For the longest time, we had only each other. We watched each other's backs. And on that day I…I…"
"You didn't fail her," Corran was gentle. "In fact, if she was looking on, she'd be proud of you now."
"Yeah," Alema sniffled, more tears came. She stared up at a small patch of starry sky peeking out through the thick clouds, letting her tears run down her cheeks unabated. "But without her—when you've lost your whole life, how do you get it back again?"
"You don't," Corran murmured, wrapping a supportive arm around her. "As hard as it is, you have to build a new one. You don't have to forget that previous life, but you can't dwell on it or ever get it back. We owe it to those we lost to keep on living, to make the most of the life we have. That empty feeling you have? Fill it up with a new family, one of your own choosing. You may have lost your sister, but you have an entire family of Jedi willing to back you up too."
"You don't talk in riddles," Alema said with a sniffling laugh.
"Huh?"
"You asked me earlier why I kept calling on you to bail me out, it's because you don't talk in riddles or give those cryptic lessons that I'm supposed to figure out on my own."
Corran smiled, stepping back. "I leave the riddle-speak to Master Skywalker."
"Hey," Alema bit her lower lip for a moment, looking nervously over at Corran. "I know this is kind of a big request and I can understand if you don't want to accept it. In fact, you'll probably be crazy to and…"
"Alema, deep breath," Corran said patiently.
Alema instinctively obeyed. "Look, you know about my first master, Daeshara'cor, right?"
"I've heard of her."

"Well," Alema licked her suddenly dry lips and her lekku twitched nervously. "She kind of rejoined the Force before she could finish training Numa and I, and I know I'm also a Knight, but I was wondering if…"
"If?" Corran prompted gently.
Alema took another deep breath and exhaled. "If you'd be willing to take me on as your apprentice. At least for a little bit."
"Me? Why me?"
"Same reason why I keep asking you to bail me out in the first place," Alema said with a faint, nervous smile. "You're not like the other Jedi. You can understand me. Well, kind of. You try to at least. But that's still better than what any of the others think of me. I…I need some sort of direction, and I think you can help me with that. Besides, I can help teach your kids a few of the tricks I picked up as well."
Corran winced at that.
"Okay, scratch the last part."
"Yes please," Corran nodded fervently; images of Jysella learning Alema's dancing moves or Valin learning about the seedier side of life popped into his mind. They already had Booster and company's corrupting presence and they didn't need another.
"So…" Alema said evaluating him hesitantly.
Corran grinned and held out a hand. "You have yourself a master, Jedi Knight Rar."
Alema beamed and let out a faint laugh. Sniffling, she weakly wiped at the still falling tears. "Great. I promise I'll do whatever you say, *master*."
Corran narrowed his eyes at the obvious connotation she had put on the word. "Still drunk?"
"Nope, that's just me being me," Alema said cheerfully, hip-checking him. "So *master* what shall we do first? Perhaps some full-contact sparring? Or maybe a lesson in how to use the Force while being distracted with physical stimuli?"
Corran groaned theatrically. "What did I get myself into?"
)-(VII)-(
The two ships supporting the *Kell Dragon* hung back while Tyria took Doran and Sannah towards the glittering planet of Bakura.
"Sentinel to approaching craft. Identify yourself or you will be fired upon."
"*Sentinel*, this is the *Kell Dragon*, we are Jedi on a diplomatic mission from the New Republic."
There was a pause, then a new voice spoke. *"Your timing couldn't be better, Kell Dragon. Prime Minister Cundertol is in the process of*

negotiating a treaty with representatives of the P'w'eck Emancipation Movement as we speak."
Tyria cocked her head, puzzled. "'P'w'eck' Emancipation Movement?'"
"Much has changed since the Jedi were last here. When you dock at the spaceport, I will greet you and fill you in."
"And who would *you* be?"
"Forgive my lack of manners. I am General Panib, head of the Bakuran Defense Force. Might I know which of the Jedi you are?"
"Tyria Sarkin-Tainer, with two apprentices in tow," Tyria said. "I'm helping them learn about the diversity of the universe as well as hone their diplomatic skills."
"Ah yes. Teaching the next generation is always a worthy cause. Well, you all are more than welcome on Bakura."
"See you ground side, *Kell Dragon* out."
"What was all that about?" Doran cocked his head. "Teaching us the 'diversity of the universe'?"
"Wraith Squadron lesson time," Tyria said, making eye contact with both apprentices. "Lesson some-hundred-and-something. Make the others make assumptions about you. If I had said that we were three Jedi on a mission to Bakura, people's guards might have been raised. But by implying that the two of you lacked training and deliberately identifying you as apprentices, anyone who wants to cause trouble will identify me as the greatest threat and underestimate you two. The *Dancing Droid* and *Webley II* will provide the cover should things start going bad. You've read about the Ssi-ruuk and know what they can do. Until we know more about the situation, I want the two of you keeping as low a profile as possible. Is that clear?"
"Yes mom."
"Yes Tyria."
"Good." The ship touched down at the designated landing pad. "The *Kell Dragon* will emit a low-frequency pulse message to our backup every five hours. After each pulse, we can use our comlinks to reset it. If we need help simply choose not to reset the pulse and help will come. This isn't like the previous adventures Doran's told you about. Nor is it like anything we've experienced before, Doran. The Ssi-ruuvi Imperium was feared for a reason, do not underestimate anything about them, nor should you trust anything they say."
Other contingency plans were discussed. Then the three Jedi readied themselves and emerged from the ship. Waiting for them was an honor guard and a short, red-haired man in a modified Imperial officer's uniform. "Jedi, welcome to Bakura."
"General Panib, I presume?" Tyria smiled diplomatically.

"Yes, and you would be the Jedi Sarkin-Tainer? It is a pleasure to meet you in person. Are these your students?"
"Doran and Sannah," Tyria said, motioning. "Because of the war with the Yuuzhan Vong, I have done my best to stick to the Outer Rim. They still have a ways to go before they join in the war effort."
"We on Bakura are honored that you find our planet an appropriate place to teach them," Panib gestured to the walkway behind him and they left the landing pad. "As I said earlier, you have come at a momentous time for our people. In a matter of days, it is possible that Bakura will soon no longer have to worry about the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium."
"So you've said."
"The Prime Minister no doubt would have wanted to greet you his self, but he is currently in very delicate negotiations."
As they exited the doors to the starport, a group of individuals suddenly rushed them. "New Republic tyrants, go home!"
Eyes widened as a wave of eggs and red paint were sloshed in their direction. Several flashes as pictures were taken, before the people responsible promptly took off in a run.
"Arrest them!" Panib yelled to the guards, distastefully brushing away an egg that had shattered on his neatly pressed uniform.
Doran, meanwhile, was looking mournfully at his paint and egg-covered clothing. He had instinctively stepped in front of Sannah the moment the group had begun to act, so he was now covered with the eggs and paint meant for both him and her.
He turned around to look at Sannah, who giggled. "You don't look too bad as a red-head."
"Ha, ha, Fish-Girl," Doran said dryly, paint dripped from his hair and egg remains slid down his body.
"I'm terribly sorry about this," General Panib told Tyria, the older Jedi likewise paint and egg covered. "We've been having a small problem with a wide-spread terrorist group as of late."
"Terrorists?" Tyria removed a piece of egg-shell from her hair. "They didn't seem like terrorists. All they did was cover us in paint and eggs."
General Panib shook his head. "Somehow they discovered that we're holding talks with the P'w'eck Emancipation Movement and are making their objections heard in many ways. They seem to view the current administration as puppets to the New Republic and don't want us negotiating any treaties on behalf of the rest of Bakura."
"Have they actually resorted to violence?"
"Not yet," General Panib shook his head. He then passed out towels one of his aides brought. "But it is only a matter of time. The fact that

they know about the top secret negotiations means that they've infiltrated the upper levels of our government."
They were led to an enclosed transport speeder. Once inside, General Panib resumed his initial debriefing. "I suppose I should begin by asking how much you know about the Ssi-ruuk?"
"They're a caste society based on the color of their scales," Doran answered.
"Highly religious too," Sannah added.
"Good, then you know more than most. A short while ago, we were contacted by a Ssi-ruu whose scales were multicolored. His name was Keeramak, and he claimed that the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium was no more."
"Really?" Tyria said skeptically.
"That was our response as well," Panib said with a nod. "But then we received a P'w'eck ambassador just yesterday who represents the P'w'eck Emancipation Movement. He says that this new government has outlawed entechment and is interested in making a peace treaty with Bakura."
"Wait, if they outlawed entechment, how will they move their vehicles?" Doran spoke up.
"They are currently incorporating ion drives into their fighters," Panib replied. "In fact, I believe that part of the treaty is to establish trade relations. Bakura would supply the P'w'eck ion drives and the P'w'eck in turn would help defend us should any threat arise. This is fortunate considering the success the Yuuzhan Vong have been having."
"It sounds almost too good," Tyria said. "This 'Keeramak' decided to betray its own race and side with the slaves?"
"The way I understand it, Keeramak had been raised as a deity-incarnate and was groomed to be the next leader. He saw the way the P'w'eck were being treated and decided to switch sides."
"Then what happened to all of the Ssi-ruuk?" Sannah piped in. "Did the P'w'eck get revenge and kill them all? I can't see them going away quietly."
"They didn't." Panib shrugged, showing he didn't really know. "You can ask the P'w'eck representative once we get to the capital building. Lwothin's actually the only source we have at the moment who can confirm Keeramak's claims. Besides, the best we can do is hope that these claims are true. Bakura is in no condition to hold off another invasion, and the New Republic is obviously in no shape to come to our aid should an invasion occur. Prime Minster Cundertol and Deputy Prime Minster Harris are both wholeheartedly for this alliance for those reasons alone."
"Do *you* agree to an alliance?" Tyria asked.

"If the P'w'eck truly have thrown off their masters, then I am all for it. It never hurts to have more friends, especially if you live out on the Outer Rim."
"*If* the P'w'eck have thrown off their masters," Doran said. "Couldn't the Ssi-ruuk simply have ordered the P'w'eck to pretend they were free? The Imperium has to be as aware of the situation in this galaxy as you are. They know that you'll be all for getting allies."
"If they wanted to take over, they wouldn't have to go through all this deception," Panib pointed out. "If they are as aware of the situation in the galaxy as we think they are, nothing would stop them if they decided to bring in their military again. Keeramak has no need to lie to us when he can just take this planet by force."
"We'll know soon enough," Tyria said impartially. Despite her words, having her son and Sannah with her made her err on the side of caution. She couldn't afford to slip up, not when their lives were at stake. "Let's see what this Lwothin has to say before we decide one way or another."
"Having a Jedi approve of this treaty would be greatly appreciated," Panib agreed. "Your people have always been both skilled warriors and diplomats."
"All we have to do now is find out which is needed more," Tyria said, inclining her head. "A diplomat or a warrior."
)-(VIII)-(
Ganner looked up wearily as his jailors, nicknamed Trooper Boring and Trooper No-Sense-of-Humor, returned. They were both in full stormtrooper armor, and he was only able to tell which was which depending on how they answered his jokes. Over the night he had gone through the full gamut of emotions, from anger to denial, and had finally reached acceptance. If the Force wanted him gone, who was he to argue with it? After all, what was he going to do? Jailbreak himself and somehow avoid the combined might of the Empire? Heck, they TIE bombed a speeder that had a Vong spy onboard. What chance did *he* have?
He just wished the Force would have been nice enough to give him a move advanced warning about his demise.
"Prisoner Eleven-Thirty-Eight stand up," the mechanical voice of one of his jailors ordered, motioning with a baton.
"Good morning to you too," Ganner grumbled, rolling out of his cot. "I suppose I don't have time to use the refresher before I get executed?"
"You should have woken up earlier," the second trooper responded darkly, snapping binders around Ganner's wrists. "Now get moving."

"Yes sir, Trooper No-Sense-of-Humor, sir." Ganner winced when the trooper brought a baton across the backs of his thighs.
"Silence, Prisoner Eleven-Thirty-Eight."
"Or what? You'll shoot me?" Ganner said glibly.
"Move!" The guard jabbed him in his kidneys this time, and Ganner was forced to stagger forward.
"Geez, that eager to see me executed?"
Ganner was led out into a courtyard and forced to stand against one of the walls. A group of seven more troopers came out and held their blaster-rifles at their chest.
"Do you want to face forward or away from the firing squad, Rebel scum?" Trooper No-Sense-of-Humor growled.
"Forwards," Ganner answered apathetically.
The trooper stepped away to join the small group of observers watching the spectacle once Ganner was positioned.
An officer stepped forward and read out a datapad. "Prisoner Eleven-Thirty-Eight is charged with murder and espionage. Due to the special circumstances and the current state of the galaxy, a trial has been waived and it has been decided that he will be executed this day. Is there any in the audience who objects?"
No one spoke up.
"Very well. Troopers, shoulder your rifles!" The line of seven troopers brought their blasters to bear. "Aim!" They looked down the scope.
"Prisoner, any last words?"
Ganner shook his head.
"Fire!"
Seven ruby red darts converged on Ganner and the Jedi felt blinding pain as the lasers superheated his flesh. He collapsed to the ground, wondering if dying was supposed to hurt so much. A figure crouched over him and injected him with something.
"He's dead." Ganner heard a voice say.
Then, his breathing stilled and his world went dark.

)-(IX)-(

And then he was aware of the world again. Was this what it was like to rejoin the Force? Ganner weakly opened his eyes. He could hear the faint hum of a ship's engine in the background, feel the cool material of the sheets draped over him. He still had a body, though there were several bacta patches stuck to it.
"Welcome back from the dead." A clipped, Imperial accent greeted him.
Ganner looked around and saw a man in his early forties sitting on a chair next to him. The man was in an Imperial uniform, which

complemented the décor of the room. Everything else around them, a black-walled med-bay, screamed 'Empire'. "'Back from the dead?' Are you sure this isn't hell?"
"You're aboard the *Widowmaker*," the man said with an amused quirk of his eyebrow. "I am Moff Ephin Sarreti and I apologize for your burns, but shooting you was necessary for our plans."
Ganner blinked. "Can I pass if you have any further plans that involve me getting shot? It really hurts, you know."
"Good to see your poor sense of humor wasn't affected," a new voice added.
Ganner blinked again. "Aren't *you* supposed to be dead?"
Vana Dorja held up a prosthetic arm and at the same time stared at him with a cybernetic eye. A metal plate covered the left side of her head. "Nearly was. The assassin was shot by Moff Sarreti's security forces before he could finish the job."
"You are perhaps wondering why you have been charged with a murder that never happened," Moff Sarreti said.
"Nope, still stuck on the part where I'm still alive." Ganner felt his bacta patches. "But I assume that the false charges also have something to do with the plan that got me shot."
"Precisely. As Colonel Dorja revealed to you, Imperial Intelligence has been infiltrated by the Yuuzhan Vong. Grand Admiral Pellaeon has been made aware of this and has put together a taskforce to deal with this threat."
"Colonel?" Ganner glanced towards the woman. "Congratulations on your promotion."
"Thank you." Dorja smiled faintly.
Sarreti seemed to have an infinite amount of patience and continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "I have been put in charge of this taskforce to see to it that Imperial policy isn't influenced by outside forces."
"So where do I come in? Having a New Republic Jedi help influence the Moff Council away from the Vong would more or less be helping the New Republic influence the Moff Council towards a treaty with us."
"Is that bad thing?" Moff Sarreti said mildly. "News of the recent successes your government has been having against the Yuuzhan Vong have made it out to here. Your government, now the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances, is in a much better place than it was when the Ambassadors Solo first came to us. Though there is still resistance to any treaty, if the Yuuzhan Vong are revealed to be complicit in a scheme against the Empire, even the staunchest of isolationists will

see the benefit of an alliance with your government. The Empire remains independent but with a powerful ally."
A third figure cleared his throat. "Moff Sarreti, the Grand Admiral wishes an update and to inform you that the Moff Council is being called to order later this afternoon."
"Thank you Colonel Vessery." Ephin turned back towards Ganner. "Colonel Dorja will no doubt take pleasure in filling you in as to what the rest of our plans are. If, however, you wish to return to Mon Calamari instead, we will of course accommodate you."
"As long as I don't get shot any more, I think I'll stick around," Ganner said.
Moff Sarreti smiled faintly and rose from his chair. "Then I look forward to working with you. Oh, and since you are sticking around, this is Colonel Broak Vessery. He's the commander of the two TIE Defender squadrons we have at our disposal. Next to him is Tan Maarek Stele, who will lead the fighter wing out of the Interdictor, the *Wrack,* if we need him."
Ganner gave a small, two-fingered wave to the men in the doorway. "Colonel, Tan."
"Jedi," Colonel Vessery, an older-looking man, nodded. His once jet black hair was frosted white and age lines on his face gave him a grizzled and veteran appearance.
Maarek inclined his head silently. Appearing to be around the same age as Wedge, the man was clean-shaven and rather dour looking. Ganner had to do a double-take because there was no mistaking Maarek's Force sensitivity. It took him a moment to remember that the title and rank of 'tan' was only given by the Emperor to pilots with great skill who had performed special services to the Empire. The fact that not even the famed Soontir Fel had received the title went to show just how skilled Maarek actually was. Though Ganner was sure that being a Force sensitive pilot was more than a little unfair to the regular guys, he understood immediately that Maarek was one of the higher ups within the Empire; the 'big guns,' so to speak.
Moff Sarreti clapped Colonel Vessery's shoulder once on his way out, and the two left the room with Maarek in tow. The only one remaining, the now Colonel Dorja, settled into Ephin Sarreti's vacated seat. "You look well for someone recently executed. I watched it over the local feed."
"Oh?"
"I was almost disappointed that you had no final words," Vana said. "I was curious as to what a man like you might say when faced with certain death."

"What's to say?" Ganner shrugged, briefly wondering if the kisses she had given him those few weeks ago had simply been part of an act. "Besides, we Jedi have that benefit of rejoining the Force."
"Ah yes, 'there is no death, there is the Force.'"
"You know the code?"
"I was forced to read up on it when I learned that you were accompanying Han and Leia Solo to Bastion," Vana shrugged. "If anything, reciting it does help one fall asleep."
Ganner eyed the heavy prosthetics the Imperial spy was wearing. In addition to the artificial eye and the metal cap overlaying one side of her head, he could see lights flashing silently from some type of regulator on her chest through her uniform. The assassin had taken large chunks out of her and Ganner had a feeling that she was lucky to be alive at all.
"It doesn't hurt, if that's what you're wondering," Vana said drolly, seemingly not at all concerned with her 'cyborg' status. "Unlike you, I'm not one to complain about getting stabbed, shot, and cleaved apart."
"Getting shot was a new experience for me," Ganner said in his defense.
"It's a wonder how you Rebels continue to win against the Vong when you're so soft," Vana sighed with a shake of her head. And with that, the awkward atmosphere that had fallen between them, was gone.
"Okay Rebel. Here's what we've learned so far. The Yuuzhan Vong spy has access to the highest of clearances and listens in to the Moff Council. The spy might even have an ally on the Moff Council who is doing the exact opposite of Moff Sarreti."
"Forming a secret group to cause the Moff Council to vote in a specific way?"
"Precisely. We know for sure that one of the operatives in this Yuuzhan Vong group has ties to the research wing in the Imperial Headquarters. Moff Sarreti's people have uncovered a second line of searches mirroring your own. We also know that Hegerty was questioned by an unknown Intelligence officer about the nature of her research, and revealed that you were searching for a moving planet. We have eyes out in case this officer returns."
"So, what's our next step?"
"Before we start hunting for spies, you need a new identity, a new cover story," Vana said. "After all, Ganner Rhysode, the Jedi spy and murderer was executed this morning."
Ganner shrugged. "No big loss. I never liked that guy anyways."
Vana nodded. "I didn't either."

)-(X)-(

Barab I's atmosphere was so clogged with smoke that those who stepped out onto the surface needed to have their own oxygen supplies and protective goggles with them. The naturally red sun of the Barab system was a faint glow above the stormy clouds of black, and the entire planet was engulfed in the artificial darkness.

The survivors Anakin and the others had rescued looked about the remains of the capital city in shock, watching as a memorial monument slid into the boiling ocean.

"To think that my people do this because they believe it pleases the gods," Shaeri, who had been on the *Trickster*, whispered softly. She wore a gnullith to protect herself from the noxious fumes rising from the razed landscape around her. "I would never want to worship a deity that thrives on the suffering of others."

"You can't blame them," Tahiri said, placing a hand on the younger teen's shoulder. "They were brought up knowing only one truth, given no other option until arriving in this galaxy. Your leaders, the Supreme Overlord and the Warmaster, use that religion to both lead your people and to manipulate them. I'm sure that your people will soon find a way to live in peace with others."

"I hope so," Shaeri said, illuminated by the glow of the boiling magma pit that had once been a Barabel dwelling. "For a species that prides ourselves on making the most out of living things, we are far too good at ending life."

Off to the side, Anakin and Jagged were examining a larger structure, one of the few that existed above the surface. The building was similar to five, short grain silos bunched together; four cylindrical chambers attached to a center chamber that rose only three stories tall. The structure had received heavy damage during the bombardment and looked as if it was going to collapse at any moment.

"This waz once the Hall of Memories," Saba said, moving to them. At her side was a younger-looking Barabel. "Reswa was one of the scribes working here to preserve the stories of our people."

"Thankz once more for the rescue," the younger female Barabel inclined her head. "We Barabel now have another tale to tell about the legendary prowess of the Jedi."

"Err…thanks, I think. But we still haven't rescued the others, so hold off on those stories of our 'legendary prowess' for now, okay?" Anakin glanced back to Saba. "This Hall of Memories contained records?"

Saba nodded. "It waz relatively new, constructed only five years ago. It contained a collection of written accounts of stories passed down through the ages. Heroic deedz, events in the skyz, disasterz, and

more. Ironically, the Yuuzhan Vong attack would most likely be among the talez added to it."
"The Force is telling me that I have to go in there," Anakin said softly. "That there's something of importance in that building." Even as he spoke, a part of it collapsed into a nearby crater.
"If I let you go in, your sister would be most displeased with me," Jag said, holding an arm out to keep Anakin from advancing. Jaina was still in orbit with the rest of Barefoot squadron, ensuring that the Yuuzhan Vong didn't make an unexpected return. "And this is after what Jedi Kwaad would do to me."
Anakin saw Shaeri and Tahiri in deep conversation and kept his eyes on them as he replied. "Then come with me, we're going to have to be quick."
"Thiz one will help as well," Saba said.
"Az will this one," Reswa spoke up. "It iz the least I can do since you saved me."
The group of four cautiously entered the large arch that framed the entryway into the middle-most chamber. They then had to ascend a ladder to get to a raised platform, with Saba explaining that permanent structures had to keep things off the ground due to the massive rainstorms Barab I frequently suffered.
From the platform, they could see paths that led to the other four rooms. One had already collapsed in on itself and another appeared to have suffered a direct plasma strike.
"I hope what we need isn't in one of those two rooms," Jag said.
Anakin groaned. "I'm afraid it is. It's the one that collapsed in on itself."
A rumble, and small pieces of debris rained down on their heads.
"Then we should hurry," Saba said. "Before this entire structure collapsez in on uz all."
The two Jedi used the Force to move some of the debris out of the way. Even as they did, they could hear ominous cracking sounds throughout the rest of the structure. They quickly but carefully entered the room. The walls were lined with shelves filled with wooden and clay tablets. The floors were littered with tablets that had fallen from the upper shelves, and many of the tablets irreparably damaged.
"What are we looking for?" Jag asked.
"A story, I think," Anakin said, closing his eyes and concentrating. "It's one of the tales the Barabels put into writing."
"There haz to be hundreds of talez here," Reswa said, turning around.
"The Force will guide uz," Saba said, keeping a hand on the shoulder of her hatchmate.

The building rumbled again and several of the wooden floorboards beneath their feet splintered.
Reswa glanced uncertainly at the elder Barabel. "Does your Force share the same sense of urgency az uz?
Saba shook her head. "Unfortunately."
"Jag! Saba! Reswa! Third row. Just gather everything!" Anakin shouted as the entire floor began to give way.
The group hurriedly scooped up armfuls of the wooden and clay tablets and made a break for the exit. Behind them, an entire wall collapsed and the chamber began to fold in on itself. They left the building just as a sinkhole appeared beneath it and swallowed it whole.
Anakin managed a weak grin as he caught his breath. He turned around and found himself standing face to face with Tahiri. His grin disappeared. *Oh, oh.* "Errr…hi?"
"'Hi' yourself," Tahiri said, she jerked her head towards the others. "What'd you tell them to get them to follow you this time?"
"I had a hunch?"
"You had a hunch and they followed you just like that?" Tahiri rolled her eyes and shook her head. "So, what'd you find that was worth nearly getting crushed by a falling building and dumped into a pit of lava?"
"Not sure," Anakin looked back to the others, who were now spreading the tablets out in front of them. He knelt and added the few tablets he had managed to save. "I'm not even sure what these tablets say."
"It'z in our native tongue," Reswa said, smiling faintly. She glanced down at the glyphs carved into one of the wooden slabs. "It iz strange, the selection we saved pertainz to disasterz that have befallen Barab I."
"Really?"
Reswa motioned to one tablet. "Thiz one iz about a flood that killed a great many of our people after the rainz broke into the caves." She pointed to another tablet. "And this iz when a particularly strong burst from the sun caused much life to die off."
"Why would the Force tell you to find records of these disasters?" Tahiri frowned. "I doubt it was just so we could add the Yuuzhan Vong attack to them."
"I believe I know," Saba said seriously. She motioned towards a clay tablet at the end of the selection. "Thiz one tellz of a time during the early yearz of the Empire."
Reswa moved to the indicated tablet and took a moment to read it. "'And the tidez rose up and swallowed whole trackz of land. The ground

shook and the cavez collapsed. Dayz went by and many died. A month went by before the Dread Planet left the skyz.'"
"'Dread Planet'?" Jag said.
"That iz what the elderz called it," Reswa said. "It iz said that some of the mountains that exist today were created during that month, the Dreaded Month, as it iz known."
"If this one rememberz her lessons, at the time, many of our peoplez assumed that the disaster was one of the Emperor's secret weapons," Saba said.
"It's Zonama," Anakin said with a shake of his head. "It has to be."
"How else could a planet just leave the sky?" Tahiri nodded in agreement.
"I am no scientist, but an extra gravity field would account for all of the natural disasters the story lists." Jag said.
"So Zonama Sekot waz here," Saba sounded surprised, looking up at the smoke-choked sky.
"Do you know how long ago this story was?" Anakin asked Reswa.
"Almost fifty standard yearz," Reswa answered after several mental calculations. "Perhapz if we find one of the elderz, they can tell uz more. Unfortunately my transport only had the young."
"Another reason to go after your people then," Anakin inclined his head. "Saba, do your people need transport to New…Galactic Federation space?"
The Barabel Knight shook her head. "We have cavez we hide in. There may still be those that made it to safety. Do not worry for uz, Little Brother."
Anakin held up his comlink. "Little Brother to Goddess, we're wrapping up here. Departure in five."
"Goddess copies. A Galactic Federation relief vessel and several Smuggler Alliance support ships are inbound. "
"Did you manage to find out where the other Barabel were taken?"
"Hutt Space, Little Brother. The Vong commander in the area appears to be a new guy flexing his muscle. Some warrior by the name of Shith'rii Choka, a cousin of the new warmaster."
"A cousin?"
"Yup, according to the information we got out of the Yuuzhan Vong crewing the slaveship, Nas Choka got promoted to fill Tsavong Lah's spot, so he left this area to his Domain. Domain Choka's entire battle group has since been stationed at Nal Hutta as a regional capital and this Shith'rii guy has been acting in Nas Choka's place."
Anakin digested the information. At the same time, his mind was working kilometers a second. "Jaya…"

"You know I don't like that tone, Little Brother." Jaina groaned. *"What's going on in that devious mind of yours this time?"*
"Well, the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances currently doesn't look too impressive with the New Republic, Tion Hegemony, and Hapes as the sole members." Anakin began.
"And?"
"And we need to rescue the Barabel from the Vong because the older ones have information about Zonama Sekot."
"You can tell me how you know that later."
"And the Hutts will probably be very grateful if we give them back their planet. It just so happens that if Nal Hutta is the regional capital, any slaves entering the area will most likely end up there."
"I told you that the Vong had a battle group protecting it, right?"
"How would you like to get rid of another Vong commander, liberate a bunch of Barabel from a fate worse than death, retake Hutt Space, all the while getting on the good side of the Hutts and bringing the Hutt Empire into the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances? Oh, and did I mention we'd be finding out about Zonama Sekot in the process and getting one step closer to ending the war?"
"Anakin."
"Yes?"
"We're supposed to be on vacation."
"We take out Warmasters, Supreme Commanders, and entire Yuuzhan Vong fleets while on duty. What's a commander and a lone battle group compared to that?"
Silence. Finally a resigned sigh. *"We're going to need a lot more ships."*
"We'll see if the Hutt underground can give us a hand. I'm sure the exiled Hutt Grand Council can help us get in touch with them." Anakin said, grinning as he felt Tahiri realize where they would be going next.
"Hope you packed your sunscreen."
Again Jaina was silent and the silence stretched much longer than before.
"Jaya?"
"*I'm still trying to figure out how you managed to get us to your girlfriend's home planet and still make it a galaxy-saving event."*
"Your brother sets very high standards," Jag agreed with a mock glare.
"It just happens." Anakin said modestly, returning the fierce hug Tahiri was giving him. "Next stop, Tatooine."
)-(Chapter End)-(
A\N: And we're back, with my take on the Force Heretic trilogy. Yipee! So yup, the original adventure will take place mostly on Tatooine, while Doran and Sannah get to face the mighty Ssi-ruuvi Imperium's plots all

by themselves (eeep!). When all is said and done, the Force Heretic trilogy will take you all to chapter 52. There'll definitely be more J/TK moments, no worries. Danni Quee also gets a bigger role than her canon version, though that's in Book 2.
I've finished with my version of Final Prophecy and am working on Unifying Force, with the final chapter count going to end up somewhere between 65-70. If I do finish the story earlier than expected, there will be thrice weekly updates starting from when I'm done.
Jade-Max has kindly let me borrow the character of Jana from the J/TK story *From Scratch* no.3, she'll be making guest appearances throughout Book 1.
As always, reviews are definitely appreciated. Constructive feedback more than welcome. Feel free to tell me what you think. Your review doesn't have to be epic length, or even in English. A few words of encouragement go a long way to keeping those dreaded writer's blocks at bay.
For getting this story past a hundred reviews, a double-update for all. Thanks to everyone who's reviewed so far =).
Now for the anon-reviewer responses…
Jedi Master Draco- I believe I fulfilled your request from your review of chapter 29-30. Tenel Ka has said hello and goodbye to Vergere and cut her off at the 'head', and Tenel Ka is still alive and capable of walking away =). Thanks for another epic review.
Octavius Haye- Hope the two months were worth the wait. I have a rough idea of what will happen when a Solo will go dark, and it won't be anything like what was seen in canon. The Legacy era has so many fun characters to work with, it's going to be a blast when I get to it.
The two truly Anon reviewers- thanks for the reviews!

ADA 32

Thirty-Two
)-(I)-(
It turned out that showing up in orbit in a Yuuzhan Vong frigate, even it was escorted by a squadron of X-wings and one Clawcraft, was a good way to terrify the living daylights of a planet's population.
Tatooine, which had so far avoided unwanted Yuuzhan Vong attention, had actually become a refuge of sorts for the many people who had been forced to flee Hutt Space. Among those refugees were the leaders of the Hutt Empire, who had set up a government in-exile on the desert planet after the Yuuzhan Vong devastated Nal Hutta

towards the beginning of the war. As Anakin and the others quickly learned, the recent additions to the population of the otherwise sparsely inhabited planet were a bit twitchy whenever Yuuzhan Vong ships were sighted.
"No. Again, we are not the Peace Brigade, their allies, or the Yuuzhan Vong under Supreme Overlord Shimrra. You don't have to surrender or offer up your first born for our 'glorious armies'," Anakin said drolly, trying to reassure a panicked traffic controller. Apparently the man's superior had abandoned his post, leaving the poor controller at the comm, and what he probably thought was the fate of the planet. "We are Jedi Knights on an unofficial mission from the Galactic Alliance."
"*Jedi? Jedi! Oh thank the Force you've come! The sweet merciful Force that flows through everything! May we always be in awe at its wondrous powers!"*
"Weren't you just praising Yun-Yuuzhan and thanking him for allowing the Peace Brigaders to arrive?" Anakin said, doing his best to keep himself from laughing. "I distinctly remember hearing, 'Oh, thank Yun-Yuuzhan for allowing his children and their allies, the magnificent Peace Brigaders, for finding this planet. May Shimrra's people rule eternally.'"
"*Well that was before you said you were Jedi,"* the mousy voice whined. *"You try negotiating with an alien species ready to blast you into oblivion."*
"Can you tell me where the Hutt Grand Council is at the moment? I promise we won't stay longer than we have to."
"The Hutts? They took over Jabba's old place. Really angered Gorga, but that slug had to obey the others. Serves him right, taking over Jabba's operations and acting like he was sooo important."
"Thank you for your help," Anakin ended the communication before the man could continue.
The *Trickster* and its fighter escort flew by over the shifting sands and landed in the Dune Sea, a little ways away from the rounded former temple that had once been the home of the notorious crime lord Jabba Desilijic Tiure. They had only just begun to disembark when a procession exited the converted temple.
"Oh look, a welcoming party." Tahiri commented only half paying attention to the approaching group. She was more interested in being able to once more wiggle her toes in the familiar warm sand, and was taking great delight in doing so.
"A sacrificial lamb, or Hutt, in his case," Zekk said, spotting the hover-platform that contained one of the slug-like creatures. The Hutt appeared to have brought with him all of his attendants, dancers, and

other servants. If he was going to die, at least his own wait-staff wouldn't outlive him by much.
"Well, they aren't shooting at us, so that's a plus," Jaina commented.
The group of young Jedi waited, forming a line behind a bemused Anakin.
It is your idea, Little Brother, Jaina's thoughts were tinged with amusement.
I need to stop having those, Anakin sent back, projecting a feeling of mock betrayal when even Tahiri joined the ranks of the others behind him.
The procession stopped just within hearing distance.
"The great and illustrious Vedo the Hutt, leader of the Anjiliac clan and member of the Hutt Grand Council, welcomes you all Jedi," a translator called out. Evidently, the Hutts still weren't taking any chances because the translator was an actual person instead of a droid. "He would like to know why you have sought out the Hutt Grand Council."
Anakin approached the procession, slowly as to not alarm the clearly jittery group. When he was only a few steps away, he knelt politely in front of the hover-platform. "Great Vedo, I thank you for your warm welcome. I have a plan that may benefit both my Jedi Order and your position among the Hutt Grand Council."
The large Hutt regarded Anakin with amusement, emitting a tsking sound as he did. "[You are rather young for a Jedi. Has the situation become so desperate that they must send their children to fight and bargain?]"
"If you are not interested in what I have to say, I shall take my leave." Anakin rose. "Perhaps one of the other Hutts will be keener to restore the Hutt Empire to its glory."
"[I did not say I was not interested,]" Vedo said quickly. "[Speak your piece quickly, young Jedi.]"
Anakin inclined his head respectfully. "My group is currently tracking several ships full of Barabel slaves recently taken from Barab I. Information we uncovered leads us to believe that these Barabels were taken into what was once Hutt Space. The recovery of slaves isn't important enough for my government to send help, but more ships are needed to recover the slaves. What I am proposing is a treaty between the great Hutt Empire and the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances. My team will help the Hutts reclaim Nal Hutta and the rest of your realm. In exchange, the Hutt Empire joins the Galactic Federation as a partner and equal."
"[You wish for the Hutt Grand Council to provide information about the underground movement to help you free your Barabel slaves?]"

"Yes, and because it will be best for all of us if the Yuuzhan Vong no longer control what is rightfully that of the Hutt Empire, we will help the underground rid Hutt Space of the Yuuzhan Vong there."
Vedo let out a deep belly laugh, and his entourage promptly joined him. "[You Jedi are always amusing. You believe that your few ships can help defeat a battle group? You think that we would risk the underground for this reckless and unbelievable plan? I need proof. Proof that you can do as you say. What is your name, young Jedi?]"
Anakin smirked and held the Hutt's large eyes. For once, his name would actually come in handy. "Anakin Solo."
The laughter stopped at once, and the Hutt gazed at Anakin in a new light. "[Solo? Anakin Solo? You are aware that the Yuuzhan Vong have put a bounty on your head? Much, much more than the bounty Jabba placed on your father.]"
"I was not aware," Anakin said. "But you know as well as I that turning me in won't help your people. At best, you will just direct the attention of the Yuuzhan Vong to this planet. At worse, they will finish off what they began at Nal Hutta. As for proof of my ability to carry out the plan I brought before you. A Hutt as well connected as you will have doubtlessly heard of my accomplishments. Agree to this alliance and not only will you be the Hutt responsible for the restoration of your people to Nal Hutta, you will have done so at very little cost to the Hutt Grand Council."
"[Any treaty must be discussed with the other members of the council.]"
"Of course," Anakin agreed. "But you will still be the one brave and smart enough to have brought it before the others."
Vedo's head was now bobbing amicably, a broad grin on his face. "[Then have your friends join me in my return to the palace. I wish to see the looks on the faces of the other members of the Council when they find that I have not only returned unharmed, but with the solution that will return our people to Nal Hutta!]"
"As you wish, Vedo," Anakin smiled.
)-(II)-(
"You don't wish to challenge me to a duel to the death," Jacen said, waving his hand at the group of Hapan nobles who had intercepted him in the hallway of the Hapan Palace. Normally he wouldn't take the time, but after the fifth challenge from another set of perspective suitors, things had gotten ridiculous. He had received challenges for hand-to-hand, blasters, vibropikes, ceremonial blades, and surprisingly enough, coufee; a noble had recovered a few back when Hapes was invaded and had trained himself.

Now that he was on Hapes for pleasure instead of business, he apparently had grown a giant target on his back. Of course he wouldn't have had such a huge target on his back if he hadn't spent the last ten days with Tenel Ka touring the Hapes Consortium's vast array of nature preserves. During that time, he had heard wild stories that he had kidnapped the Queen Mother and was attempting to seduce her with his Jedi ways. It would have been wildly laughable—as if he could kidnap Tenel Ka in the first place—if it weren't for the fact that many of the nobles and suitors were taking them seriously. Add to the fact that at twenty years of age most of the nobles saw him as a young and naïve mark, his time on Hapes hadn't exactly been uneventful. But it was definitely nothing he couldn't handle.

"We don't wish to challenge you," they dutifully repeated.

"The Queen Mother will be very angry if she hears about this. Again," Jacen added the last part in a bored tone.

"The Queen Mother will be very angry," the nobles agreed amicably. So much for the nobility of Hapes not being made up of weak-minded fools.

"You are delaying my picnic with her, you will let me go about my business unmolested."

Again the nobles repeated his command, stepping aside as they did.

"Thank you," Jacen said pleasantly. Then, just because he couldn't resist, and because most of the suitors were almost twice his age, and thus almost twice Tenel Ka's, he gave them one last command. "You will evaluate your lives to determine why the Queen Mother hasn't responded to your advances, and improve on any flaws you discover."

Jacen watched in amusement as they went off to do his bidding. If he was lucky, maybe he had just improved a small section of the Hapan nobility. He shook his head wistfully and resumed his brisk walk to his destination, one of the many gardens within the palace walls.

It was a larger garden, with a small grove of trees ringed by several meter high hedges, providing both privacy and comfortable shade.

"Sorry I was late," Jacen said, entering the grove and running a hand through his hair. "I was…held up."

"Understandable," Tenel Ka said, unable to keep herself from smiling. "Jana already told me what transpired in the hallway. She was even kind enough to make me a list of the offending nobles."

"Ah yes, your super-secretary. We definitely owe her for that fun-packed trip she planned," Jacen chuckled, he took a seat on the blanket spread out on the ground. "You don't have to worry about those nobles, though. Hopefully they should demonstrate an improvement in character soon."

Tenel Ka raised a fine eyebrow. "Truly?"
"Then again, these are Hapan nobles we're talking about," Jacen shrugged, sensing several other nobles lurking behind a row of hedges. Broadcasting a brief suggestion into their minds, he sent the nobles scurrying off to more important business.
"I have gotten used to it," Tenel Ka sighed wearily. "There are very few places I can go without someone watching. Most of them are harmless, and the ones who do have ulterior motives don't even bother to lurk. But enough of such talk."
"Yes, to lunch," Jacen grinned.
Tenel Ka motioned to the picnic basket and Jacen pulled out a chilled bottle of wine. "To celebrate your victory at Ebaq Nine."
Jacen was surprised to feel a sour taste in his mouth. "I didn't really do much. It was Anakin who helped to turn the tide."
Tenel Ka studied him for a moment and inclined her head. "Then to celebrate another reunion."
"I'll drink to that. May we have many more," Jacen popped the cork and poured an amber colored liquid into the crystal glasses Tenel Ka was holding. "I really appreciate the time you took to personally escort me through the dozen nature preserves within the Hapes Consortium. It's amazing to see such diverse array of life in this section of space alone."
"I am glad you had so much fun, my friend," Tenel Ka said, her grey eyes sparkling. She fondly remembered the expression on Jacen's face as they went through one preserve after another. Years had melted away. It had almost been like the war had never happened. Like she had never taken up the crown and left her friends for such a heavy burden. The last ten days had been just the two having fun, enjoying their bond, and just being kids again. She almost didn't want it to end.
"I too greatly enjoyed our time together. It is not often that I get the opportunity to step away from the throne for more pleasurable pursuits."
"Though your dad sure looked relieved when we returned," Jacen chuckled. "I have a feeling he won't let you take any more time off any time soon."
"That," Tenel Ka said with a small laugh. "Is a fact."
They clinked their glasses in salute to a successful and uneventful vacation.
"So, what's it like? Ruling sixty-three star systems?" Jacen said, setting his glass down and reaching for a bowl of some sort of salad.

"Not as fun as you would think," Tenel Ka shook her head. "You would think being the Queen Mother would mean that the people would listen to your commands and requests."
"They don't?"
"Only when it suits them," Tenel Ka said dourly, holding up her plate so he could serve her. "In this game, I have to keep my enemies close, and my friends far away. The moment I start showing favor to someone, the others swarm them."
"An interesting comparison considering some of the creatures we saw," Jacen said with a youthful grin.
"Yes." Tenel Ka's eyes glittered with mirth. "Comparing the Hapan nobles to the Archais Piranha Beatle is an apt description."
"Whenever you have to speak to them next, just imagine them as giant bug-eyed little things," Jacen agreed.
Tenel Ka shook her head in amusement. "I shall try that next time. At the very least, it will make the conversation more entertaining than usual. Now what about you? Is it true that you have been named as one of the Jedi on the High Council?"
"Named, yes. I still have to be confirmed," Jacen said, feeling a spike of emotion that had nothing to do with pride or happiness. He grimaced and glanced down at the food he was eating, wondering if it was to blame. "I would have been a non-voting observer member, but Anakin gave up his voting seat for me."
Sensing the swell of darker emotions, Tenel Ka cocked her head and frowned. "And you are not happy at this opportunity?"
"I don't know," Jacen sighed, staring up at the shifting branches of the trees sheltering them. "I should be, shouldn't I? I guess…I guess I'm just a little angry that the council rather have Anakin instead of me."
"They wanted to have the both of you," Tenel Ka pointed out.
"And they wanted him as a voting member," Jacen countered, setting his glass down. The bitterness in his voice caused even more words to leave his mouth. "That shows whose opinion they respect more. I don't know why I feel so frustrated when I think of that. I should be happy that my brother's finally getting the respect and recognition he deserves. That my brother has everything he could want. He's strong in the Force. Understands the Yuuzhan Vong in a way I probably won't ever be able to. He can even touch them through the Force. He has most of the Jedi fawning over him. A girlfriend who's crazy about him. And even Uncle Luke has begun to leave some decisions to him. He doesn't need the voting seat on the council to influence the Jedi because he already has so many followers, so many people looking to him to win the war."

"You are jealous," Tenel Ka said softly.
"Of course I'm jealous!" Jacen snapped, the tree branches rustling violently at his outburst. "Anakin goes off on a half-baked plan to save the Jedi on Yavin Four and comes back with a lambent saber and a whole new understanding of the Vong. I learned how to sense the Yuuzhan Vong only after being captured and tortured by Vergere. The Myrkr mission? I caution moderation, that acting will only get more Jedi killed. Anakin wants action. What happens? Jedi die. We lose nearly our entire strike team and he's still treated as a hero! My caution is brushed aside as timid inaction. I've even heard whispers that I'm more like Uncle Luke. And you know what the galaxy's opinion of him is like! Hells, I've only got a voting seat because my little brother took pity on me. Even Jaina seems to know what she wants. She's a colonel now, has command of her own Vong frigate as well as the Twin Suns. She even supports my brother on his reckless plans, encourages them. They brush aside my concerns like I'm some foolish nobody. Why can't they see that I want them to be safe, to survive this war? I don't want them to needlessly risk their lives just because they're expected to. My family has already lost Chewie and many of our other friends. Anakin's not invincible. Neither is Jaya, mom or dad. I won't lose them either! I… I can't."
In the end, Jacen was left panting, his hands curled into fists and his eyes closed as pained tears leaked free. This was a side he didn't show to anyone, not even to Vergere. His fears, his anger, his jealousy and self-doubt. To everyone else, he may appear to be a calm and collected individual. A cold block of logic and reason to counter the more heated impulses of the Jedi in the order. But, in the semi-privacy of this garden within the Hapan Palace, Jacen couldn't hold back the dam of emotions that burst forth.
He startled when he felt a gentle touch on his cheek. He opened his eyes and saw that Tenel Ka had pulled herself closer, their foreheads nearly touching. She said nothing. Her grey eyes shining with a soft understanding. She kept her hand cupping his cheek, and gradually the emotional maelstrom that had consumed him was siphoned away. The rustling branches resumed their natural sway in the light Hapan breeze, and a pressure was lifted.
"You are you, Jacen. My best and dearest friend," Tenel Ka whispered softly, leaning forward so that her cool forehead touched his warm, sweat-slickened one. "You are the one who taught me the lesson of arrogance and pride. Who showed me that I must earn my place. That a place is not just given to me because of who I am. It is because of you, I have people I can call friends. Though my duty is to the people

of Hapes, it is thoughts of helping you and the others that give me the strength I need to bear the crown I now wear. To prove that I am worthy of it, and of your continued friendship. Your successes are my own, as are your sorrows and fears. I have found my place in this galaxy partially because of your actions all those years ago; when a foolish girl lost her arm wanting to prove that she was superior to a young boy who ended up being wise beyond his years. You will find your place in this galaxy, Jacen. That is a fact. But you must walk down your own path to get there. Not travel down one already made for you. You are not Anakin. Nor are you Jaina. "
"Tenel Ka," Jacen said, his voice hoarse. She placed a finger over his lips to silence him.
"You are only one of two Jedi who can truly sense the Yuuzhan Vong, one of four with Vongsense. This is something even Master Skywalker cannot do. You will be one of only eight voting Jedi on the High Council, the highest and most powerful decision making body in this galaxy. You continue to be true to yourself, to retain your humanity and emotions, even when the war has taken much from us all. Use your compassion, your position, to help better this galaxy for all of us. To keep those you care for safe. Make the most out of your situation and continue to be the voice of reason even when you think no one else is listening. That is what the Jacen I know would do. That is who you can be if you so choose."
Jacen managed a weak smile. "Since when did we switch places and you become the one wise beyond her years and me the foolish child?"
"We are all allowed a little foolishness every once in a while," Tenel Ka said lightly, her heart skipping a beat when he brought up one of his hands to cover her own.
"Have I ever told you how amazing you are?" Jacen murmured, their lunch lying forgotten on the side.
"Not in a long time, my friend." Tenel Ka choked out, her emotional barriers slipping at the surge of emotion that welled up at that comment.
"My apologizes." Jacen used his other hand to cup her cheek, tilting her head so that their eyes met. "Might this humble Jedi show his appreciation and thankfulness with a kiss?"
Tenel Ka swallowed and nodded. "He may."
"Then, thank you." Jacen leaned forward.
She may be the Queen Mother of sixty-three systems. And he may be Jacen Solo, famed Jedi and child of Leia and Han Solo. But in that moment, on a picnic blanket beneath a tree in one of the many palace

gardens, they were simply two very close friends sharing a brief respite from their burdens and the horrors of war.

)-(III)-(

The streets of Bakura looked and felt different at night, Doran decided. Walking hand-in-hand with Sannah, the two young teens were exploring the sights and sounds of the downtown district. It had a life of its own, a period where both shadows and the lights from the buildings intermingled. Where the smells of the day's labor and the sounds of a new crowd filled the air.

After hearing the P'w'eck representative explain the P'w'eck uprising and subsequent downfall of the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium, the two young Jedi and Tyria had been far from convinced. It would be great if it were true, but the Force wouldn't have guided them to this planet if everything was going well. Something was wrong, and they needed to find out what.

While Tyria handled everything on the government end, she had told the two of them to get a general feel of the planet's populace. There was definitely more to this than met the eye.

So, now the two of them were on an unofficial date of sorts. To everyone else, it looked as if they were just two teens enjoying the evening. But in actuality, they were using their time to seek out the many currents of life flowing throughout the planet. Sannah, given her Melodie nature, was able to naturally move with the currents and root out any disruptions in its flow. Having developed it as a survival instinct when she had been on Yavin VIII, she had further honed this ability in the life-filled forests of Yavin IV.

Doran was using a different method but achieving similar results. In the many obscure teachings he and his mother had uncovered during their travels, one of them involved attuning one's own Force presence to the planet they were on. Each planet, each city, had its own unique Force vibration, and whether it was hundreds of thousands or only a handful of people living in one place, each vibration could easily be heard if one knew how to listen.

Guided by the Force, the two found themselves towards the middle of a good-sized crowd in front of one of the shopping centers. In the very center of the crowd, standing on a pedestal commemorating the first defeat of the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium, was a dark-haired teenage girl. She was holding a microphone and pumping her other fist into the air.

"We cannot stand aside and let the puppets of the New Republic dictate our future for us!" She called out to the crowd. "Oh, wait. I almost forgot. The New Republic, tired of being defeated, changed their name, didn't they?" Her mocking tone brought laughter from

some of the crowd. "The Prime Minister and his lackeys seek to negotiate a treaty on our behalf? Have they even asked us for our opinion?"
"No!"
"Right! They just assume they know what's better for us. Just like the tyrants they serve, they are little more than despots who have no right to remain in office! But as much as we would like to, we can't use violence to remove them. That would make us no better than they are and it would disrupt the Balance. What we can do, though, is make our voices heard! We can make sure that they never get another good night's sleep until they step down and allow the population of Bakura to choose leaders that don't bow down to the will of the Galactic Alliance. This is Bakura, a planet whose leaders should answer to no one else but the people they serve. If you haven't heard yet, at this very moment, our beloved Prime Minister is having tea and biscuits with a Jedi from the Galactic Alliance."
The boos for her comment had both Sannah and Doran shift uneasily.
"That's right," the teen said with a distasteful expression on her face. "Our great leaders are cozying up to the Jedi, boasting about the great deal they made in hopes of pleasing them. You all remembered what happened the last time the Jedi came to prominence in this galaxy?"
"The Purge!" Shouted a member of the ground.
"Yes," the teen said. "The Purge. And like before, history is repeating itself. The Jedi have become too powerful, upsetting the Balance of this galaxy. So the Balance allows the Yuuzhan Vong to lessen their number, just like it should. Why should we continue to side with a government that not only cannot win its own war, but allowed such an imbalance to happen? So what if the Jedi are killed? It was their presence that brought about the misery so many experience; even today. What we need to do is separate ourselves from this Galactic Alliance. Tell their leaders that we want no part in it. Just like all of you, I am of Bakura. And we," The teen gestured to four people immediately around her. "Are Freedom!"
At those words, several large floodlights filled the area and a hoard of peace officers flooded the area.
"By order of the Prime Minister, this is an unlawful assembly. Disperse now or you will be apprehended!" A voice over loudspeakers announced.
"You see!" The teenage girl yelled back. No one had moved. "They fear mere words! They fear the truth! We will not fight. But we will not move either! We are Bakuran, we shall not move!"
"Bakuran!" The crowd roared back in agreement. "Bakuran!"

"We were hoping you'd say that," the two Jedi heard the officer say with a smirk. "You were all warned. Arrest them all!"
The peace officers advanced, but the crowd immediately locked arms and refused to move. Shock grenades and flash-bangs landed all throughout, but still the hundreds or so people who had gathered didn't budge. In the chaos, the young teen and those who had stood with her disappeared back into the immovable mass, becoming just one of the many.
"Blast it! Find her!" The officer yelled, as his men did their best to break up the living chain of people.
For a non-Jedi, finding a handful of individuals in a large chanting crowd at night is nearly impossible. For a Jedi, the only challenge was keeping up with the fast moving group. Sannah and Doran used the Force to help them move through the mob of people, even as the security forces continued to close in and push the bodies closer and closer together.
Just as they reached the edge of the crowd, however, blaster fire sounded back in the middle of the crowd and the chants gave way to screams of terror.
"No!" Sannah and Doran heard the girl hiss in dismay. "I said no violence!"
"We can't do anything about that now, Malinza," another voice said. "We have to get out of here before more the security forces start shooting back."
"Where's Salkeli?" A third voice said frantically. "He's the one who said we should run."
"I lost him in the crowd."
"Then we should go back for him," Malinza said.
"No! It's too dangerous."
"But…" More blaster fire, and this time the security forces didn't hold their fire.
"Doran," Sannah said, her eyes widening at the sight. The mostly defenseless mass of individuals was being thinned by the millisecond under blistering red laser fire.
"Stay on them," Doran jerked his head towards the fleeing group. "I'll catch up."
Sannah nodded, and Doran reversed course, jumping off building ledges and speeders back towards the line of security forces. All around, people continued to fall. As in tune as he was to the natural vibrations of the planet, each death was like a discordant note in the melody of Bakura, wailing before fading out into silence. Blaster fire was now going in only one direction, but still it did not let up.

Doran glared at the members of the security force. With one final leap, he landed in front of the commander and motioned with his hand. The commander's blaster and those of his subordinates around him flew out of their hands and clattered to the floor.
"Tell your men to stop firing. Now." Doran said firmly, lacing his words with the Force.
The commander reached for his comm. "All units, cease fire."
The silence that followed was just as deafening as the torrential blasterfire.
"Tell me why you were firing on the protesters?" Doran pressed.
"We were only following orders," the commander replied. "We are to use any means necessary to subdue this armed rebellion."
"Armed rebellion?" Doran repeated incredulously. He gestured back towards the crowd. "They have no weapons besides their words!"
The commander stepped forward, and as he did, the contents of a cargo-lifter behind him came into view. "They were armed terrorist bent on sowing havoc on our planet and ruining a great opportunity for the true patriots of Bakura."
"Terror…" Doran trailed off. The cargo-lifter held several transparent crates. Within the crates was a wide variety of old-model blasters in poor condition. His eyes widened and he looked back towards the massacred crowd, then back to the crate. He had been on enough adventures with his mom, seen enough politicians and corrupt guards, to understand what was about to happen. There was no reason the security forces needed a cargo-lifter full of decrepit blasters with them unless the blasters were going to be used to frame those they killed.
"You shouldn't have gotten involved, kid," the commander's voice shook Doran.
The young Jedi turned around just as several blasters opened fire on him.
His world spun as he collapsed to the ground.
The security forces resumed firing on the crowd.
Doran's eyes fluttered shut.
)-(IV)-(
Sannah let out a strangled sound, stumbling and crashing through several aluminum bins as her connection with Doran suddenly vanished. The group she was following immediately spun around, several of them pulling out blasters.
"No!" The leader of the group quickly reached out to lower the outstretched arms of her companions.
"Malinza, she could be a spy for Cundertol."

"She isn't, Vyram," Malinza replied, her sharp eyes locating Sannah's lightsaber attached to her utility belt. "It's worse, she's a Jedi."
Sannah, at the moment, couldn't care less about the group. Her eyes were squeezed shut as she frantically tried to locate Doran again. A further check of their bond revealed that it hadn't vanished completely, just heavily dampened. As if he was unconscious. She stretched her mind out, searching for him. Though he was unconscious, he was moving further and further away.
"What's wrong with her?" another female voice said. "Is she going to do one of her Jedi tricks on us?"
"It looks like she's about to freak out or something," a fourth voice commented.
"Let's just stun her and get away, we're too close to the Stack."
"Quiet, all of you" Malinza commanded.
Sannah refocused on the hooded group in front of her, her yellow eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I mean you no harm."
"Why were you following us?" Malinza asked.
"A disturbance. Something about the Bakuran government doesn't sit well with the Force," Sannah said softly. "Doran and I came here to find out what. But now Doran's unconscious."
"Where is he?"
"He went back to stop the security forces from firing on the crowd," Sannah breathed.
"That's a wasted effort," snorted a brown-haired teen. "Those are Cundertol's personal lackeys. Some of what we've seen them do…" He trailed off shaking his head angrily. "I swear the commander of that corps has to be an unfeeling machine to carry out the orders our beloved Prime Minister gives him."
"The man's a former head of security at ODT," a blonde haired, pony-tailed teen said darkly. "Cundertol brought him in after the previous commander of the security forces ran against him in last year's election. Didn't even bother trying to hire a Bakuran. And now that dunderhead is in talks with the P'w'eck without asking the rest of the planet if they even want a treaty."
"You know about the P'w'eck?" Sannah blinked.
"We have an ally in the government," a Rodian said from behind her.
"Salkeli, you made it!" Malinza said in relief.
"Sorry I was late." The Rodian stepped around Sannah to join the others. "They really had the area locked down tight. We're telling the Jedi our plans now?"

"Just trying to figure out where they stand," Malinza said with a shake of her head. "Look, if this 'Doran' guy was taken prisoner, there's only one place he'll be taken."
"The Salis D'aar Penitentiary," the other human male, Vyram, said. "It's where all the political prisoners are taken."
"I'll talk with Master Sarkin-Tainer," Sannah said. "Maybe she and I can convince Cundertol to release him."
"Good luck with that," Malinza shrugged. "Since he came to power, half the people taken there aren't ever seen again. If the government even acknowledges their presence anyways."
"I'm getting him back," Sannah insisted. "But before I do, I want to know a little more about your Freedom movement."
"Why? So you can go tell Cundertol the first chance you get? I told you she was a spy, Malinza."
"Give it a rest, Zel," the blond girl snapped. "It's Malinza's choice."
"Oh? And I suppose this girl and her Jedi buddy just happened to be at our rally today and had nothing to do with the raid? This is the third rally we've had recently that's ended in violence. The presence of the Jedi on this planet has obviously upset the Balance and we're all paying for it."
"It's Sannah," Sannah said, weaving as much calm into her words as she could manage. Her worry for Doran continued to gnaw at her. "And like I said earlier. I'm not here to hurt anyone. I just want to learn about what's been happening on this planet. We've learned about one view from the Deputy Prime Minister, Prime Minister, and General Panib. I'd like to learn what's been happening from your point of view."
"It's simple, the New Republic dogs that are running this planet are running it into the ground," The blond girl said, turning on Sannah. Malinza exhaled and rubbed at her forehead to ward off a sudden headache. "Come with us and we'll tell you all about it."
"Wait, we're bringing her to the Stack?"
"We are." Malinza said. "You pointed it out, Zel. This is the third rally we've lost control of. If we don't do something soon, things are only going to get worse."
"I think we're making a mistake," the Rodian member of the group argued. "Aren't we supposed to be against the Jedi and their tyrannical government?"
"Talking won't hurt. Besides, Sannah looks even younger than me. If we're lucky, she hasn't been completely brainwashed by the lies she's been fed. Talking and listening never hurt anyone."
"Fine," Salkeli said. he looked to the others for support, but none of them spoke up. "I still think we're making a big mistake."

"We'll see," Malinza shrugged. "Follow us, Sannah. Maybe you can help make sense of the chaos this planet has been spiraling towards. Help restore the Balance to this galaxy-forsaken place. In turn, depending on what you choose, we just might help break your partner out of prison."
Sannah swallowed. "Thank you for this chance."
"It's the least I can do for one of Uncle Luke's students," the dark-haired teen shrugged "Whether I'll end up regretting this still remains to be seen."
)-(V)-(
Ganner was starting to feel like one of those action stars in the holovids. The kind that started out as a nobody, then was recruited into a secret organization to battle an evil the general public wasn't aware of, and went on to fight larger-than-life battles. There was even an arch-villain and the learned teacher in this vid. Moff Ephin Sarreti was a mostly hands-off type of leader, letting his subordinates do whatever needed to be done, while the Yuuzhan Vong continued to be that boogeyman hiding in the shadows.
The only rule that his little secret organization had to follow was that assassination was out of the question. They knew that they Yuuzhan Vong had support high up in Intelligence, and possibly even on the Moff Council itself. In this case, however, chopping off the head would only make it harder to find the rest of the body.
They had their work cut out for them. The more they looked, the more it appeared that the Yuuzhan Vong had thoroughly infiltrated the Imperial government much like they had the New Republic. And if the war with the New Republic was anything to go by, this wasn't a good thing.
Seated at the table within the conference room of the Imperial frigate, *Widowmaker*, Ganner poured over the data with the other leaders of the group.
There was Colonel Broak Vessery. The TIE Defender squadron commander who had an air about him that reminded Ganner of Wedge Antilles. The man was cool, collected, and very analytical. His loyalty was first and foremost to the pilots under his command and to the Imperial Remnant second. He also had a storied history. The colonel had survived the fall of the Empire the first time around, had allied with Ysanne Isard during the following years, then took his pilots to the Imperial Remnant once it had been firmly established as a stable power. His men were just as loyal to him and it showed in the way they obeyed his commands unquestioningly and steadfastly continued to throw their lot in with the white-haired colonel.

Also seated with them was the head of the stormtroopers at their disposal, Lieutenant Pallin. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, despite his rank, he was one of the few Imperials that actually had a great deal of experience fighting the Yuuzhan Vong. Originally an archetypical Imperial Officer, he had learned through battling with the Peace Brigade and Yuuzhan Vong on the border worlds that by-the-book didn't work if your enemy has read said book. He also had a self-taught background in intelligence gathering, thanks to the need to write a new book in order to combat the Yuuzhan Vong.
Apart from Ganner and Colonel Dorja, the last member at the table was Captain Arien Yage. A no-nonsense woman whose ship they were using as their headquarters. She had both the trust of Supreme Commander Pellaeon and Moff Sarreti and would update both on their progress.
"The question of the day, how do we stop the Yuuzhan Vong from causing the collapse of the Imperial government?" Ganner said, glancing down at the list of possible Yuuzhan Vong sympathizers; it was disturbingly long.
"And that's assuming we've identified all the sleeper agents," Pallin agreed. "Any one of them could create problems."
"Three confirmed Vong, seven sympathizers, and ten more being blackmailed, in the space-traffic control of Bastion. Four sympathizers that we know of in the water-quality division. Another two Vong in the agricultural division, with who knows how many sympathizers," Vana threw her datapad done in disgust. "It's hard to believe so many Imperial citizens would sell out their own government so easily."
"They are simply doing what they think is best for their government, as misguided as it is," Colonel Vessery said.
"You're defending them, sir?" Pallin said in disbelief.
"I am merely pointing out that to the sympathizers, they see their actions as being beneficial to the Empire. Perhaps even saving it from a Yuuzhan Vong attack. It also helps that the Yuuzhan Vong have support in the highest level of this government, legitimizing their actions."
"The problem is, if we move, we have to move all at once and in every department." Ganner said. "Lieutenant Pallin is right. Can you imagine us missing a Vong in space-traffic control? He could kill hundreds with just a push of a button. Unfortunately, if we wait too long, the damage could already be done. It doesn't take an analyst to tell us why the Vong have agents in your food and water divisions."
"We're fortunate the Yuuzhan Vong decided to focus mostly on Bastion," Colonel Vessery acknowledged. "If they were any more widespread, the damage would be too much to contain."

"And we still haven't figured out the heads of this entire operation," Arien Yage said.
"We've narrowed it down to a dozen or so suspects in Intel, and practically the entire Moff Council," Ganner pointed out.
Just then, Captain Yage's personal comlink sounded. The captain picked it up. "Go ahead."
"Ma'am, Bastion Security forces report that a Vong frigate has just entered Bastion's space. The ship is claiming to be a diplomatic delegation and they want to meet with the Moff Council."
"Is that so?" Arien looked to the others. "Has Moff Sarreti given us any orders?"
"Yes, ma'am. The Jedi and Colonel Dorja are to be his escorts into the meeting."
"Inform Moff Sarreti that they will be with him shortly. Stand by for further orders."
"Yes, ma'am."
Arien pocketed the comlink. "Well, your opinions?"
"It's not right. Not Vong at all," Ganner said immediately. "They don't even *have* a diplomatic corps."
"I agree," Pallin frowned. "The Vong never negotiate unless they have the upper hand."
"It could be that the losses they suffered at the hands of the New Republic have limited their options," Colonel Vessery reasoned. "If they manage to keep the Empire out of the war through diplomatic means, they'll have time to rebuild and attack later. We've all seen the ease with which they shattered the backbone of the New Republic. The Empire is not even half the size both territorially or militarily. Either way, the Moff Council cannot afford to reject this opportunity."
Vana stared at the datapads for a moment. "The arrival of the frigate does not bode well either way. Currently, we are only certain that we have sixty percent of the Vong network identified. That's still several hundred people with sympathetic feelings towards the Vong running about unchecked."
"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Ganner said, a feeling of dread settling in his stomach.
Vana met his eyes and nodded. "There is a good chance that the Vong sleeper agents are going to awaken in the near future."
)-(VI)-(
Being dead was okay, Ganner decided. To hide his identity, he wore a face-mask over a majority of his face. The skin that did show had heavy prosthetic make-up on making him look like a victim of a very horrific burn. Contact lenses turned his blue eyes red, and a modulator

pressed against his throat made his voice raspy. He wore the gauntlets, shoulder pads, and chest-pieces of a stormtrooper's outfit. But, in the same vein as the Imperial red guards of old, had the usually white armor painted red for a more dramatic and intimidating effect. He also had on the standard black shirt that all stormtroopers wore beneath their own armor, as well as a pair of black gloves. Instead of continuing with the modified stormtrooper-red guard outfit theme, he completed his ensemble with a pair of loose-fitting black pants and sturdy boots to keep his mobility at its peak. On a whim, he added a brown cape that he had seen in the *Widowmaker*'s supply of desert clothing. After all, all Jedi should have capes or cloaks, even if they were undercover.

Ganner thought he looked mildly impressive. But when stepped out to show the others his new look, the normally stoic Colonel Vessery had raised an eyebrow in amusement and made a comment about Rebels and their over-the-top disguises. Whatever that was supposed to mean.

Vana Dorja, also supposedly deceased, had a disguise of her own, though it was much less than Ganner's. Now 'Colonel White,' her hair was dyed the color of her name, and make-up helped turn her skin an equally pale shade. With her cybernetic implants that now kept her alive, and blood-filled remaining eye, she looked like a living ghost. They were both standing at attention behind Moff Sarreti as they waited for the remaining members of the Council to fill in.

Ganner eyed the Yuuzhan Vong representative, a B'shith Vorrik, carefully. There was no missing the fact that the Yuuzhan Vong's aides, all eight of them, had what Ganner recognized were medallions that denoted them as followers of Yun-Harla.

A holo-emitter activated, and a light shown onto one of the vacant chairs, forming the image of the last of the missing Moffs. *"Forgive my tardiness. Problems on Yaga Minor prevent me from joining all of you personally."*

"These are indeed trying times, Moff Flennic," Supreme Commander Pellaeon inclined his head. "You are not alone. Both Moff Norda and Moff Seral have also joined us via holo-transmission." The commander of the Imperial fleets motioned to two more physically empty chairs and the holos that sat in them.

While pleasantries were carried out, Ganner's feeling of dread from earlier only increased. Something wasn't right. If only he knew just what.

"You are correct, Supreme Commander," the Yuuzhan Vong, B'shith Vorrik, said. "The Yuuzhan Vong Empire has no quarrel with your own

Empire. And, if the stories are true, you are not exactly a friend of the New Republic either. If you agree to this non-aggression pact, the great Shimrra is willing to give you the immediate star systems boarding our two territories once this war is over. This will expand your territory by a third of its size and put in your possession several resource-rich worlds."
"You would just give us these worlds?" Pellaeon's eyebrows rose.
"Of course," B'shith nodded amicably, something that was hard to do given the fact that his face and scalp was nearly devoid of skin. "As a sign of good will. Shimrra is not interested in your Empire or its holdings and giving you these planets is our way to assure you of our intentions."
"Is the war against the New Republic really going so poorly?" Pellaeon tested the waters.
B'shith grinned, an act that made his head more akin to a smiling skull. "It is nothing we cannot handle. Surely *you* do not wish to bring your great empire into a war that will cost you the lives of your citizens?"
Ganner began to ignore B'shith and concentrate on his subordinates. They had shifted so that two of them were hidden by the stocky forms of the others. He subtly nudged Vana, who very deliberately closed and opened her eyes to acknowledge that she too was watching them. She let her eyes fall on Pellaeon, who was seated next to Ephin Sarreti, and Ganner very slowly edged himself along the wall until he was behind the Supreme Commander.
Again, it all felt like another holovid. What invasion or coup wasn't complete without the assassination of the council? And now the Vong sympathizers had been narrowed down to the three Moffs who were attending the meeting via holo-transmission.
Of course, he could just be paranoid. Sure, the Yuuzhan Vong were just here to make nice and play footsy with the Moff Council. Oh, and while they're at it, here's a bunch of systems for free. No need to be suspicious or panic at all.
To Ganner's surprise though, when the meeting adjourned, nothing had happened. He blinked wildly at Vana, who seemed likewise confused, as the Yuuzhan Vong and the Moffs all rose. Maybe he *had* been watching too many holovids in his boredom. The Yuuzhan Vong really *had* arrived just to play footsy with the Moffs.
"We'll of course have to discuss your proposal," Supreme Commander Pellaeon said neutrally.
"Take all the time you need," B'shith said. "My men and I shall return to our ship in the meantime."

And like that, the people began filing out of the room. Ganner's forehead furrowed in confusion. The sense of dread still hadn't lifted. The Yuuzhan Vong delegation was the first to leave, all nine who were present. The Moffs were next, with the holo-transmissions flickering off. This left both Moff Sarreti and Supreme Commander Pellaeon as the last of the important council members in the room.
"Something's not right," Ganner shook his head.
"I agree," Moff Sarreti acknowledged. "But there is little we can do for now. If their offer is a legitimate one, they can give us far more than your government can. At least, that is how my colleagues will see it."
"Moff Sarreti, Supreme Commander," Vana looked to her superiors. "It is too risky to allow the Yuuzhan Vong to remain in Imperial space."
"They arrived under a flag of diplomacy. And technically, the Empire is not at war with the Yuuzhan Vong," Pellaeon pointed out. "There is little we can do unless the entire council votes otherwise."
"The longer B'shith and his friends remain in orbit, the nastier their scheme will get," Ganner warned. "He may not have brought a fleet with him, but he'll still be able to bring down your government."
"I am aware of that," Pellaeon said grimly. "That is why I gave Moff Sarreti and your team their assignment. While I cannot expel the Yuuzhan Vong, I can stall any vote for as long as I possibly can."
"And how long will that be?"
"You have three months," Pellaeon said, holding up three fingers in emphasis. "Three months at most, to uncover the Yuuzhan Vong plot and end their treachery. If you fail to do so in that time, I cannot stop the Moff Council from doing as they will. I'm sure you are well aware that they prefer peace to war and will doubtlessly vote in favor of a non-aggression treaty. They have always been rather short-sighted when it came to the well-being of this empire. No offense meant, Moff Sarreti."
"None taken. I wholly agree with you, Supreme Commander." Ephin Sarreti said lightly.
"And if we discover another Moff is supporting this, sir?" Vana said, her hands clasped behind her back.
"You will inform me and *I* will deal with it," Pellaeon said. "You may have had orders to the contrary before, but the arrival of the Yuuzhan Vong changes things. All others are now expendable provided you have solid proof that they are working against the interest of this government. Just…try and keep the damage to a minimal. You Rebels tend to take too much pleasure in blowing up monumental works created by this empire."
Ganner chuckled softly. "We'll do our best, Supreme Commander."

"If only you were born in the Empire," Moff Sarreti said glibly. "We could use people as loyal and talented as you."
"Me? As some type of 'Imperial' Jedi? No way," Ganner said good-naturedly, idly adjusting his red-painted stormtrooper gauntlets and shoulder pads. "You obviously don't know me well enough, I'm not exactly a fan of conformity and rules. Your uniforms are a bit snazzy though."
Vana pulled Ganner by the arm. "I apologize for his lack of protocol, sirs. We'll continue to investigate the Vong plot as soon as we return to the *Widowmaker*."
"See that you do," Pellaeon said. "I don't care what the Council will think. If the two of you are successful, you two are receiving the highest honors we can give you."
"Not necessary, sir. I'm just doing my duty," Vana replied with a sharp salute.
"And I'm just along for the ride," Ganner smirked.
Pellaeon's expression softened ever so slightly. "Good luck you two. And Jedi Rhysode. I don't know if this will help, but may the Force be with you."

)-(VII)-(

As far as negotiations on Tatooine went, an event normally filled with blasterfire or violent accusations, Anakin's offer lead for fairly quick and trouble-free talks. The other Hutts on the Grand Council were just as eager to reclaim their home planet as Vedo was, and the added bonus of not having to risk their own metaphorical necks in doing so, sealed the deal. A hypercomm transmission to a very startled Cal Omas made the Hutt Empire a part of the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances on the condition that Anakin and the others helped them reclaim Nal Hutta.
Per the terms of the treaty, the Hutt Empire would more or less be treated as an entity similar to the Hapes Consortium; it would retain its own political autonomy, but would share an economic and military duty with the rest of the Galactic Alliance. In return, it would also be defended by the Galactic Alliance should it be attacked, and trade tariffs on certain goods would be removed.
Cal Omas had been completely nonplussed by the sudden agreement and his diplomats had quickly been scrambled so they could work out the finer details later. The Hutts had always remained independent from the New Republic, and it was a coup for Cal to have them included in his government's new, fledgling form. He was well aware that the Hutts wouldn't have seen a need for such treaty had they retained Nal Hutta. It was only because the Hutts were particularly

vulnerable at the moment that they had even considered agreeing to an alliance. At the moment, the Hutts were the weaker of the two, and by no means an equal despite the wording of the treaty. Yet, in time, when the Hutts recovered, the economy within their sphere of influence would be very robust and wealthy. Opening it to the wider galactic trade would only help all parties in the long run.
Though, nothing was set until Hutt Space was cleared of the Yuuzhan Vong.
The Chief of State had recognized what Anakin was doing and as a gesture of 'good faith towards future relations,' granted permission for a Galactic Alliance task force to help out. It was a small task force, the maximum number of men and ships Cal could send without a senatorial vote, but it was more than what Anakin had to work with before. The 'Insiders,' a secret movement within the Galactic Alliance started on Borleias to allow for a more fluid fighting force, realizing that the Solo siblings were taking more of a working vacation, also pledged some of their resources. On top of that, the leaders of the Hutt Underground were meeting up to help coordinate the coming offensive. Unfortunately or not, everyone wouldn't arrive for another few days, at least.
In the meantime, Anakin and the others quickly found ways to enjoy their brief reprieve.
They *were* on vacation after all.
"That was nice of the Hutt Grand Council to give us bantha," Tahiri said cheerfully, inspecting the four animals that were absently grazing at giant feed bin despite the supply packs strapped to them. "And the portable sonic showers, we're definitely going to need them."
"*These* are bantha?" Shaeri blinked at the woolly pack animals.
"Yup," Tahiri said, affectionately patting one of the creatures on the head. It lolled and closed its eyes in contentment.
"But you named the *rakamat* 'Little Bantha.' I…I had always though that the bantha were a fierce war-beast used by the people of the desert."
"Nope," Tahiri smiled to herself as she hooked up a saddle to one of the creatures. "These guys are about as docile as they come. They make pretty tasty steaks too."
Shaeri continued to stare in disbelief at the shaggy, horned animals.
"Czalpak's going to be so disappointed." She said, referring to the Freed One warrior who was unsurpassed in hand-to-hand combat.
"Since you got 'Little Bantha' from Borleias, he's been all excited about personally taming a bantha, making it his own personal war-mount."

"And when did you start talking to the Freed Ones in General Antilles' fleet?" Tahiri said with a knowing grin.
Shaeri's eyes bulged comically and the fifteen year old former Shamed One immediately looked away. "I…he….we…He was merely concerned about the well-being of the avatar of Yun-Shuno," Shaeri managed to recover, nodding her head convincingly. "Though he serves Yun-Yammka, it was the avatar of Yun-Shuno who first made him free. I just thought it prudent to keep him informed about your health."
"How kind of you," Tahiri giggled. Being on Tatooine again brought back all sorts of good memories. With the warm sand between her toes and the familiar dry heat, she couldn't help but be happy. "Hey, before we leave, I can get you some bantha steaks. You can send it to Czalpak and say that they're from a fearsome bantha you personally slew. That ought to impress him."
Shaeri blinked, before shyly hiding a smile with one of her hands. "You are generous indeed, avatar of Yun-Shuno."
"Of course, Yun-Shuno provides to those loyal to her," Tahiri said brightly. "Here, I can help you put on the saddle to the last bantha and you can even tell Czalpak that you tamed one before him."
Shaeri moved to help, though her lame leg and crippled fingers made the job of saddling the large beast a bit more challenging. "So these desert people we are visiting, they are your…is 'clan' the right word?"
"Kind of," Tahiri tightened a strap. "They raised me after my real parents died. 'Tribe' might be a better fit. Each tribe is a giant extended family, much like a Yuuzhan Vong Domain. They have their own part of the desert, their own customs, and their own laws. The Tusken people raise their children communally, much like the Yuuzhan Vong crèche system. The men are the warriors and the women care for the children."
"The Tusken people and the Yuuzhan Vong seem to have much in common."
Tahiri nodded. "It's probably why I was able to so easily accept the Yuuzhan Vong part of me. Both they and the Tuskens appreciate life and prefer to live without metal technology. Even the weapons are similar. A Tusken gaffi stick can be wielded in ways similar to a hardened amphistaff."
"I look forward to meeting them," Shaeri said.
"Hopefully they still look forward to seeing me again," Tahiri muttered.
"Tahiri?"
"After I last saw them, the one who cared for me, Sliven, died. The one who took his place never really approved of my being in their tribe."

"Surely when you return and they see how successful you've…" Shaeri trailed off when Tahiri shook her head.
"The only things that matter to the Tusken people are feats that have helped the tribe prosper. It doesn't matter if I command my own squadron or helped free thousands. If it doesn't benefit the tribe, it isn't worthy of recognition. At nine years old, the children are sent off into the desert to prove their worth, to show that they won't be a drain on the tribe's resources. A Tusken warrior who slays a krayt dragon brings strength back to his tribe. A Tusken who helps to negotiate a mating between tribes has strengthened his own by increasing its size. In the end, all deeds are judged by how they benefit the tribe. That is the law of the desert."
"It makes sense," Shaeri said. "For the Yuuzhan Vong, there is nothing worse than someone who embarrasses one's Domain. It does not matter if the Yuuzhan Vong is a shaper, warrior, or priest. If the Yuuzhan Vong fails to bring glory or praise from the gods to the Domain, he is relegated to lesser tasks."
"It will be interesting to see what the Tuskens think of the Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri said, finishing the saddle of the last bantha.
"It will be interesting to watch them react to your return," Shaeri said.
"Yup. The last time I went back, they sent the old me and Anakin out into the desert where we battled a krayt dragon and had all sorts of fun," Tahiri said with a chuckle at the fond memories. "Hopefully the visit this time around won't be as eventful.
Shaeri gave Tahiri a mock skeptical look. "You are the avatar of Yun-Shuno. Anakin is the avatar of Yun-Ne'shel. There is no such thing as an uneventful day for you."
"Thanks a lot," Tahiri said dryly. "All we're doing is visiting old friends out in the middle of the desert. How much trouble could we possibly get into in the middle of a desert?"
)-(Chapter End)-(
A\N: The answer to Tahiri's question…find out next week. Things pick up next chapter as most of the young Jedi have fun under the twin suns. The two stuck on Bakura, not so much. Ganner's Imperial story-line will pick up once more at the next interlude.
Deleted* Scene:As I mentioned last time, Ahsoka's death had been a last minute thing. The following scene takes place after Ahsoka gets hit with the first burst of lightning. Lumiya, thinking herself victorious, approaches the downed Togruta.*
***Snip**Snip**

To the Jedi's credit, however, she had yet to emit a sound. "Did you really think you could defeat Vader's legacy with a few tricks and fancy words?"
Ahsoka's hand suddenly shot up and gripped Lumiya's wrist. In an instant, Lumiya felt her own concentration waiver, and the Force Lightning died on her fingertips. The disorientation was so strong that Lumiya doubted she could so much as lift a rock. The Jedi slowly rose before her, keeping an iron grip on her wrist.
"'Go with what your opponent expects and use that expectation against them,'" Ahsoka breathed heavily, steam still rising from her body. "That's a lesson Anakin Skywalker, *my* master, taught me."
Lumiya could barely focus on the Jedi before her, her mind feeling as though a bank of clouds had settled in it. Whatever the Jedi was doing, Lumiya found herself unable to concentrate well enough to use *any* Force technique. She tried to pull her hand free, but the Jedi wouldn't relent.
"Let's try this again," Ahsoka said, her voice glacial. "Tell me who your current master is. Now."
The full power of the woman's Force enhanced voice nearly had Lumiya blurt out the answer. The Lady of the Sith, however, shook her head and kicked out with a heavy, booted foot in desperation.
The Jedi was forced to release Lumiya's wrist, and the Sith promptly broke out into an all-out run back to her shuttle. The ramp closed behind her and Lumiya frantically began the take-off sequence. Before the sequence was even finished, the shuttle began to rise into the air all by itself. Lumiya was rocked out of her seat and then pressed against the forward viewport as the shuttle was tilted downwards. The dark Jedi saw the Togrutan woman standing in one place, a hand outstretched towards the shuttle.
Panicked, Lumiya activated the shuttle's weapon system and bombarded the area around the Jedi with destructive bolts of energy. The Togruta let the shuttle go, and it jarred violently before shooting up and out into the air.
Ahsoka watched the dark Jedi disappear into the sky with a heavy heart. She had no doubt that the person she had just faced meant trouble for the Jedi Order. Despite her words to the Sith, the dark-sider had been skilled and well trained. The fact that she had confirmed herself to be only the apprentice didn't bode well at all. The real puppet master was still behind the scenes, and obviously close enough to Anakin Solo to know about his sojourn to Shili. That in itself was worrying.

But if what Lumiya had said was true, that Anakin Solo was already being targeted and groomed…Ahsoka swallowed painfully. As the adrenaline left her body and she felt the full extent of the aches and pains the Sith warrior had inflicted on her, the Togruta sagged back to the ground with a groan.
Enduring the bolts of Sith Lightning to draw Lumiya closer had taken its toll on her body. Ahsoka had only been able to dissipate so much before the full extent of the Sith's anger and hatred overwhelmed her. She was actually lucky that Lumiya had gotten close enough when she had . Any longer and Ahsoka would have been in trouble. As it was, with the many cuts and gouges created by the lightwhip, as well as the severed part of her right montral, it was all Ahsoka could do to just remain conscious.
She took several calming breaths as she dropped into a healing a restorative trance. There would be plenty of time to hunt the Sith later. Now was a time for rest. As she slipped deeper into the trance, a faint touch in the Force mingled with her own energies and helped to accelerate her healing.
Ahsoka smiled softly at this, easily recognizing the other presence. "Thank you, master. I won't let you down."
*|**|*
Wide-eyed, Lumiya needed several long minutes to catch her breath. Her heart didn't resume its normal rate until she was safely in hyperspace. There, she sagged back into the pilot's chair and reflected on what had just happened. She had underestimated the Clone War's survivor. Had assumed that her emotions and age would affect her swordsmanship. That had not been the case.
Lumiya pulled out the remains of her lightwhip. The crystal and most of it was still intact. That was good. She would rebuild, heal, and then return twice as strong.
Another idea passed through her mind. A twisted one that made her smile. She wouldn't have to return. It would be the ultimate of ironies if the apprentice of Anakin Skywalker was sacrificed by Anakin Solo in the latter's turn to the dark side. To have Ahsoka Tano live a little longer wouldn't hurt. Not when her death was all but certain.
Snip**Snip
My original idea was to have Ahsoka rally the Order 66 survivors to back up Skywalker's Jedi when the Sith finally emerged. She and Lumiya would have a rematch and she would die giving Tahiri the opening needed for a final blow. The idea was scrapped mainly because I didn't want such a major 'old' Jedi Order figure playing such a prominent role in the 'new' Jedi Order series (Ahsoka's had her time).

This doesn't mean that parts of that plot still won't play out. A couple of Order 66 survivors have already popped up in this story in small cameo appearances and several more will be making their appearances in the next story arc. The survivors will be making very brief appearances in the sequel as a way to bring things full circle, but will otherwise stay in the background (no becoming a Grandmaster in the New Jedi Order or becoming special just for being the only one of their time period left).
***Snip**Snip**
Please leave a review if you so desire. Next update, next week.

ADA 33

Thirty-Three
)-(I)-(
"So how *do* you find a group of people who move about in this vast desert?" Shaeri looked to Tahiri from atop her bantha mount.
"The Force mainly," Tahiri explained. "Though there are a few permanent shelters the tribe uses. We should be arriving at one soon."
"The gifts we're bringing should help smooth our arrival," Anakin added. "Normally, the sentries her tribe has in place will see us long before we see them. If we're lucky, they'll ask questions first, then shoot later. Sand People aren't exactly known to permit strangers into their territory."
The three of them, Anakin, Tahiri, and Shaeri, were wrapped up in loose robes to ward off the punishing twin suns of the desert planet. Though they had started off several hours after mid-day, the heat and suns were still as harsh as ever. Each had their own bantha, with a fourth carrying various supplies, trailing behind them.
"Unless things have changed, we should already have been challenged," Tahiri said with a frown, her green eyes scanning the desert. The only things she saw were the sunbaked columns of sandstone and towering bluffs in the distance.
"Maybe the tribe isn't here yet?"
"Look!" Shaeri exclaimed, pointing to a figure lying in the desert. Tahiri promptly leapt off her bantha and landed in the sand. She deftly waded through the shifting surface and reached the body in record time. She pulled on it to turn it over. It was a Tusken Raider, several blasters burns covering his torso and a gaffi stick clenched in closed fists.
"From Sliven's tribe," Tahiri said grimly. "At least now we know why we weren't challenged."

"The blaster burn pattern is too clustered to be from another Tusken blaster," Anakin said, standing behind her.
"The shelter for the tribe is in those bluffs over there," Tahiri motioned to the rocky crags just before the horizon. "Let's go."
The banthas weren't exactly fast creatures, but they could move if urged. Planting the suggestion into the minds of the creatures that lots of food awaited them at their current destination, Anakin and Tahiri managed to spur the creatures into a fast and eager trot.
As they grew closer to the rocky cliff face, they could see columns of smoke, as well as flashes of light.
A fight was still unfolding.
Anakin and Tahiri didn't even need to exchange a glance to know what to do next.
"Shaeri, stick with the bantha. Anakin and I can get there faster on foot." Tahiri ordered.
Both Jedi leaped off their mounts, then used the Force and raced across the sands. Shaeri, blinking, glanced at the four bantha now in her care. Then at the clouds of dust that indicated the path of the two Jedi.
Shaeri finally shrugged. "At least I can tell Czalpak that I commanded a whole herd of bantha."
She clicked her tongue and urged the creatures onward.
)-(II)-(
A small flotilla of speeders and heavy-skiffs blockaded the mouth of the enclosed shelter. Turrets mounted on the backs of the speeders fired repeatedly into the caves deep within the sandstone bluffs. Several dozen mercenaries also poured small-arms fire into the caves, rocks and sand flying and superheating under the barrage. Even still, the easily recognizable bellows of the Sand People echoed back out in defiance.
"Keep firing! Gorga's not paying us to blast rocks! Fry those desert rats! Kill everyone!" A man in ill-fitting armor danced about on the back of one of the larger skiffs. "Bring the entire mesa down on them if you have to!"
The assailants didn't even know what had hit them. One moment they were intent on leveling the rocky mesa in front of them, and the next, two blurs of light were slicing through their ranks. Several of the mercs were thrown high into the air by an invisible grip and flailed their way all the way back to the ground.
One of the laser cannons moved to track the blue-bladed assailant, and was promptly split in two, speeder and all, by the purple-bladed attacker. The purple-bladed attacker took only a moment to kneel as

the speeder exploded behind him, before he once again leaped through the air, narrowly avoiding a storm of blaster bolts.
The crowd of mercenaries began to panic. Several of the speeders took off back across the sands, leaving others at the mercy of the two lightsabers. The rest quickly disengaged from the caves and worked to surround the two. They still outnumbered their attackers thirty to one, even with the casualties they had taken.
Blaster fire continued to ring out, coming in from all angles as the purple and blue blade-bearers stood back to back. The red and green beams were flying out back towards their points of origin, steadily reducing the amount of incoming fire. Slowly, the two lightsaber users began to advance in opposite directions and the ranks of the mercenaries broke once more. Two blurs of motion, and the remaining speeders that had decided to stick around were rendered in two.
The teamwork the mercenaries had shown quickly fell apart into a free-for-all, every man for themselves. Several took off running through the desert. This time blaster fire from within the cave roared, and simple, yet deadly, projectiles streamed outwards towards the mercenaries. The Sand People had joined the fight.
The next few seconds were nothing but slaughter as the disorientated, disheartened, and discouraged mercenaries were beset by the enraged people of the desert.
The man in ill-fitting armor, who had been thrown free of his exploding speeder, tried to crawl away as he heard the screams of his men. He suddenly found himself pawing at nothing but air. Swallowing, he looked over his shoulder and saw a blond-haired teen with a scarred forehead staring back at him with merciless eyes.
"Please, Jedi don't kill defenseless prisoners," he stammered.
"You're right," the girl replied, deactivating her lightsaber. "But that doesn't mean others won't."
"What…what do you mean?"
"You attacked the Sand People," the blond girl said emotionlessly. "You'll answer to the law of the desert. Don't expect any mercy."
"Wait! I can tell you information! Who hired me!" But the teen didn't seem to care. With a flick of her wrist, the men in ill-fitting armor was sent flying. He came to a crashing halt in front of the robed individuals he had been attacking only moments before.
He glanced up at them fearfully. One of the Sand People raised a gaffi stick and let out a warbling cry. The man had time to let out a gargled whimper before the metal spike came crashing down onto his head.
The rocky side of the crumbling sandstone mesa was once again quiet.
)-(III)-(

"You've returned, Tahiri," the leader of the Sand People said. Behind her, her people were gathering the supplies from the fallen mercenaries and dragging the corpses out into the desert.
"It is good to see you well, Vexa," Tahiri said cautiously. "A friend of mine is coming with fourth bantha, all the bantha and supplies are a gift to the tribe."
"And you have not forgotten our ways," Vexa said noncommittally.
"Why were these men attacking you?" Tahiri motioned to the corpses.
"We refused the Hutts," Vexa said simply, offering no further explanation.
"What offer did you refuse?"
"Since they arrived, they have been very demanding. They wanted us to guard their compounds, to work their camps in exchange for permanent shelter and food. They did not like our response."
Anakin, hearing this, let out a groan. "That's why they were so eager to help us get here."
"You work for the Hutt's now?" Vexa's tone was considerably darker.
"We are helping them reclaim their own planet."
"Good," Vexa said. "The sooner they leave, the better. We can deal with the one responsible for trapping us in impossible contracts, but not the entire council."
"Tell me more," Tahiri said.
"Our business is not for outsiders," Vexa shook her head. "You are not part of this tribe, Tahiri. Sliven may have taken pity on you, but I am not he."
"I may not be a part of the tribe in your eyes. But in my heart, I am still a part of the desert just like you all. I'd rather resolve this without any further loss of life on either side."
"That is the Jedi part of you speaking." Vexa said in distaste.
"No one wins if the Sand People go to war with the Hutts," Tahiri said sharply. "As a leader, the well-being of your people should be first. Or has that also changed since Silven's passing?"
"*I* am the leader, not you," Vexa said in a deadly hiss. "You are not in any position to tell me what to do."
"Tahiri, Vexa," Anakin quickly stepped between the two. "It's clear that *both* of you care for this tribe and its people. Vexa, Tahiri has never stopped thinking of herself as part of your tribe. She only wants to do her best to honor the ones you lost by limiting any more casualties. Jedi or not, even you can see that more deaths will only hurt your tribe and make the Hutts stronger."

Vexa's expression was unreadable behind her traditional Tusken garments as she regarded both Tahiri and Anakin. "It is clear the both of you have grown much since this tribe last saw you."
"We've had a few adventures since then," Anakin acknowledged with a faint smile. "Please, Vexa. If you will let us try it our way first. If it does not work or achieve the results you desire, you can then do as you please. We will even assist you if you desire our help."
"What do you have in mind?"
"First, can you tell us more about this deal your people were pressured into? We heard the name Gorga mentioned."
"Gorga the Hutt was the Hutt in command of the operations on this planet," Vexa said. "When the other Hutts arrived, he was forced from his palace into a temporary housing and much of his operations were disrupted. His organization has found it hard to carry out its usual activities due to the prying eyes of the other Hutts. In an attempt to regain some of his lost power and pride, he tried to hire multiple tribes, ours among them, to guard his illicit shipments through the desert and to a hidden base. Not all of the cargo was illegitimate, though. Many times he would mix official Hutt cargo with his own to mask his activities. When the tribes began to refuse to assist him, he convinced the other Hutts we were a threat. Though they have yet to move on us, they have given Gorga full permission to handle the Sand People as he sees fit. Already two tribes have been destroyed by his thugs."
"So if we convince Gorga otherwise, the problems with the Hutts should stop?" Anakin clarified.
"You will do more than convince Gorga," Vexa said warningly. "This attack alone killed eleven of my tribe. And you know, Anakin Solo, that that number is significant enough to reduce this tribe to minor status."
"What have the other tribes done?" Tahiri asked.
"Some hide. Some have begun raiding Hutt properties," Vexa answered. "The Hutts have spilled our blood. It is only right we spill theirs."
At that moment, Shaeri and the four bantha she was tending arrived. The Sand People let out sounds of alarm when they realized Shaeri's race. After some conversation, they proceeded to the fourth bantha and began unloading the supplies.
"You did not tell me your friend was a Yuuzhan Vong," Vexa said, sounding mildly surprised.
"You know of them?"
"We know that Gorga deals with them on a regular basis," Vexa answered.
"What!"

"Gorga makes deals to keep his contraband flowing within Hutt Space. Other tribes reported Yuuzhan Vong guarding some of his facilities. There are even rumors he is trying to move a krayt dragon off-world.
"Just what we need." Anakin grimaced. "A Yuuzhan Vong modified krayt dragon. But this changes things. It's more than simple greed now. It's doubtful Gorga will be convinced to stop if he has Yuuzhan Vong forcing his hand."
"The other Hutts can't know about this deal." Tahiri frowned.
"If they did, we just offered them a better one," Anakin said. "Instead of running their government from exile, we're actually giving them their planet and territory back. Something the Yuuzhan Vong won't do. But, given what you just said Vexa, Gorga's is the one who stands to lose the most. I wouldn't be surprised if he's with the other council members now complaining of how we attacked a Hutt sanctioned operation."
"Or telling his Yuuzhan Vong friends that two Jedi have arrived on Tatooine," Tahiri muttered.
Anakin shook his head. "He'll probably do that as a last resort only. Imagine the prestige he can get from handing the two of us over. He'll use us to leapfrog over the council, probably have the Yuuzhan Vong dispose of them and install him as a puppet ruler."
"If only we had evidence for that," Tahiri said disgruntledly. "He's still a member of the Hutt Grand Council so we can't do anything to him without proof."
"There is one place you can start looking," Vexa said.
"There is?"
"A sarlaac pit, far away from prying eyes out in the middle of the Dune Sea. The other tribes report that Gorga has established a base there with his Yuuzhan Vong allies. If there is any evidence of his treachery, it will be there."
"Can you and your tribe assist us, Vexa?" Anakin asked. "The help of your tribe will be instrumental in bringing down a Hutt of Gorga's position."
"And you are truly people of the desert," Tahiri added, understanding what Anakin was doing. "Both Anakin and I have the Force to guide us, but the desert's sand runs in your veins. We cannot get there without you."
Vexa was silent as she eyed the two young Jedi. Finally, she briefly inclined her head. "Perhaps, the two of you have grown even more than I thought. If you will give us a moment to break camp, we will be on our way at sun-down."
)-(IV)-(

Jag and Jaina walked hand-in-hand down the streets of Mos Eisley. Though Tatooine wouldn't exactly be the vacation planet of their choice, they had a take-what-life-threw-at-you kind of attitude. The streets were a bit more crowded than usual due to the influx of refugees from Hutt Space, but not overly so. If there was one group of people benefitting from the war it was all the merchants on Tatooine making a killing off their sales.
And the crime lords who made a literal killing off extorting the said merchants.
While Jaina and Jag drank a unique cocktail from one of the many cantinas, a small commotion was breaking out in the main market. Several Weequay, Aqualish, and Gamorreans were overturning stalls and making a mess of the place.
"Are you sure you don't want to pay Gorga his fair share of your profits?" A Weequay thug sneered, glaring at a group of frightened Rodian and human merchants. He unholstered his blaster and pressed it against the forehead of one of the merchants. "He'll be very disappointed to hear this."
Jaina glanced at Jag, who made a shooing motion with his hand. "Go."
"It won't take long," Jaina said brightly, handing him her cup and giving him a brief kiss on his cheek.
She strode past the hulking Gamorreans before they even realized she was there. A glare at an Aqualish thug had him stumbling backwards. One of the supporting Weequay thugs clamped a hand on her shoulder to stop her. She grabbed it and flipped him onto his back. Two other Aqualish moved in her path, blocking the way with their vibroblades. She used the Force to enhance her speed and promptly knocked their heads together. They slid to the ground with a groan. This seemed to get the ringleader's attention, who threw the merchant he was threatening to the ground.
"Who are you?" He scowled, waving his blaster threateningly. "Don't you know little girls shouldn't stick their noses in things that aren't they're business?"
"I must have missed that lesson," Jaina said lightly. She gestured and his blaster flew into her hand. She detached the energy pack and threw the gun over her shoulder. "You really need to hire better help if all they're good for is beating up unarmed merchants."
"Jedi scum, you don't want to cross me," the Weequay said warning. "I'm a lieutenant for Gorga the Hutt."
"And I'm Jaina Solo. My mom killed his uncle." Jaina said, taking a step forward. She and Jag had learned about the resident Hutt in charge of the desert planet from their cantina hopping. Apparently Gorga had

inherited the family business after Jabba croaked. The Hutt hadn't fallen far from the family tree. "Just give me a reason to continue the family tradition of getting rid of useless Hutt-slime."
The Weequay finally began to look nervous, glancing at his remaining, conscious, henchmen.
"You really don't want to give that order to attack me," Jaina sighed, plucking the thought from his head. To discourage him even further, she showed her lightsaber attached to her utility belt.
The Weequay swallowed, then held out his hands. "Look Jedi. I was only doing what Gorga told me to do. I have no quarrel with you."
"Tell Gorga to lay off the merchants," Jaina said. "We made a deal with the Hutt Grand Council to help them reclaim their space. They won't be too happy if they learn he's jeopardized that treaty by angering the Jedi."
"Right, right. I'll do that," the Weequay nodded eagerly.
"Please do," Jaina said with a forced smile. "I'd hate for any more altercations to occur while I'm here."
She began to walk back towards Jag. It didn't take her Jedi senses to know that the Weequay was going to shoot her in the back the moment he had the opportunity. It also didn't take a Jedi to know that a certain Clawcraft pilot was a much faster draw. Before the Weequay's hold-out blaster had even cleared its holster, a red beam of light flashed over Jaina's shoulder and nailed the Weequay in the head.
Jaina glanced at the other thugs. "Anyone else feel like being stupid today?"
They all shook their heads.
"Then leave. Now."
The remaining thugs picked up their injured brethren and disappeared as fast as they could. Silence fell on the market. Then just as quickly, cheers rang out from the gathered crowd.
"Jedi! Jedi! Jedi!"
Jaina grinned, people patting her on her back as she made her way back to Jag. "Nice shot, Fel."
"This won't be the last we'll hear of them," Jag said, handing her her cup.
"Of course not," Jaina said, draining the rest of her cocktail. "But Gorga's a Hutt. He'll probably try to do something underhanded next time."
"You're not worried the other Hutts will back him?"
"They'll lose more than they have to gain," Jaina answered, linking arms with him. "Let's worry about that later. We still have Mos Eisley's main cantina and that former Imperial outpost to check out."

"The one where they filmed that HoloNet reality show 'Troops?'"
"That's the one," Jaina grinned. "Afterwards we can see what that sandcrawler that's parked outside the city is selling. Maybe even help the Jawas actually fix their merchandise."
"And people say Tatooine isn't a vacation planet," Jag said with a low chuckle.
"Yup, you just have to make the most of it. The company definitely helps too."
Jag looked down at her with a smoky gaze. "That is most certainly true."
)-(V)-(
Jaina had thought that Gorga the Hutt's next move would be underhanded; maybe an ambush in a darkened alley, or poison in her food. She apparently overestimated the crime lord's imagination. She and Jag had just finished perusing the wares being hocked by a Jawa sandcrawler when what looked like a small army of speeders swooped all around the sandcrawler and other patrons in a tight circle.
"Twenty-seven, twenty-eight," Jaina murmured, counting the number of thugs dismounting from their vehicles. "Thirty-five, thirty-six."
"Forty-three in all," Jag finished for her.
The Jawas started to panic and pile into their sandcrawler, leaving their merchandise behind. The thugs didn't seem to care, and even let the crawler depart. The rest of the patrons had also fled, leaving Jag and Jaina alone in the middle of the forty-plus thugs.
"Gorga really needs to learn from his mistakes," Jaina muttered.
"You have a way to survive this?" Jag raised an eyebrow as the thugs closed in.
"You're forgetting who you're talking to," Jaina said superiorly. "I am Yun-Harla, Mistress of Tricks."
"This mere mortal would like to survive the encounter too," Jag replied dryly.
"On a count of three, drop to the ground as low as you can go," Jaina said. She began to build up a massive amount of pressurized Force energy in her hands.
The seconds ticked by and Jag dropped to the ground. The moment he moved, the thugs opened fire with their own blasters. Jaina, however, had already set her plan into motion. The Force burst out of her hands like twin cannon-blasts into the loose sand dunes. A thick layer of sand was thrown up into the air in a powerful vortex of Force energies, obscuring everyone's line of sight.
Everyone who couldn't see with the Force that is.
A violet blade ignited in the artificial sand-storm and went to work.

By the time the sand settled once more, silence reigned.
A sand-covered Jag pushed his way out of the sand dune and looked around. A majority of the thugs were dead. Several of the thugs who appeared to be the leaders of the group were bound with their own binders and gagged, stacked on top of each other in the back of one of the speeders. Jaina, who didn't have a single grain of sand on her despite the maelstrom she had kicked up, was sitting on the side of the speeder sipping from the souvenir canteen she had obtained from their stop at the main cantina.
"Hey Jag," Jaina held up her canteen in salute. "What do you say we pay a visit to Gorga next?"
"You know where he is?" Jag dusted himself off.
"Yup," Jaina jerked her thumb to the bond and gagged thugs in the cargo area of the speeder. "They were nice enough to tell me. It's some place in the middle of the Dune Sea."
"We've already seen everything there is to see in Mos Eisley," Jag shrugged. "Our trip would not be complete without a tour of the desert."
"Exactly," Jaina said brightly. "Isn't Gorga so considerate?"
"He has been very accommodating thus far," Jag agreed. "The entertainment has been satisfactory, though his hospitality is a bit lacking."
"We'll let him know," Jaina said, as both she and Jag piled into the speeder, with Jag in the driver's seat. The speeder hummed back to life and Jaina let her hair loose as the desert scenery began to flash by them. Flashing a grin to Jag, she stretched out her arms and sighed in the warmth of the sun. "I hope the others are having this much fun."
)-(VI)-(
Zekk was perusing one of the larger droid and ship parts' store, *Yukal's Family Emporium*, in a different part of Mos Eisley, when he thought he saw a flash of red hair. Blinking, he glanced through the shelves of droid heads. Sure enough, two very familiar-looking red-headed girls were guiding a grav-loader stacked with several supply crates, while each of them carefully balanced a tray of droid parts across their forearms.
"Taryn?" Zekk said in disbelief.
Taryn gasped, jumping slightly in alarm as her head whipped around. "Zekk?"
"What are you doing here?" They both said at the same time.
"I asked first," they again said in unison.
"I'm on a mission," they said, still together.

"Okay! Stop that! That's creeping me out," Trista interrupted. She then blinked in confusion. "And aren't Taryn and I supposed to be the ones in sync?"
"Nice to see you too, Trista," Zekk chuckled.
"You as well, Jedi Knight Zekk," Trista said formally, politely inclining her head. "It has been almost a year, I trust you have been well?"
"I am," Zekk said, bemused at how different the two twins were.
"So, what are you doing here?" Taryn repeated, stacking the tray of supplies she had been carrying on top of the one her sister was carrying and happily bouncing up to Zekk.
"Following Anakin on one of his crazy plans like always," Zekk smiled. "And you? This is a long way from Hapes."
"The Queen Mother wanted us to track several criminals charged with smuggling," Taryn said eagerly.
"No she didn't," Trista rolled her eyes from behind the stacked supply trays. "We're supposed to be helping our dad pick up some unique supplies not available in the Hapes Cluster."
"That's our official job," Taryn said with a pout. "We both know that…"
"Any unofficial orders are not meant for non-Hapans to hear," Trista said drolly.
"Come on, Trista. Zekk's not going to tell anyone." Taryn muttered. "My sister, always a stickler for rules and duty."
"My sister, always mixing pleasure and business," Trista muttered back, foisting Taryn's tray of droid parts back into her twin's arms. "Anyways, we should get going. Our father expects us back soon."
"He just let the two of you go free on the streets of Mos Eisley?" Zekk raised an eyebrow.
"You can escort us back if you're not too busy," Taryn said brightly. "You know, to keep any undesirables from taking advantage of us two vulnerable young girls."
"Please do," Trista sighed, shaking her head. "She won't shut up about you otherwise. Even if you don't, we have a squadron of security droids and one of our older cousins right outside the store."
Zekk was about to agree, since he really had nothing better to do, when he felt something in the Force that shouldn't belong. His smile fell from his face and he focused on the anomaly. He recognized it at once. It wasn't something *in* the Force, it was an absence *of* the Force surrounding one individual. His head shot up and he began to scan the shop. It was crowded, especially the section for bodyguard droids.
"Zekk?" Taryn said, growing serious at the expression on his face. Both she and Trista placed their trays of parts on the grav-sled and allowed hold-out blasters to fall into their hands.

Zekk spotted what he was looking for. A larger human, with a small retinue of followers, leaving the store.
"I'm going to have to pass at the moment. Look, just get back to your father as soon as you can and get off the planet."
"Vong? "Trista hissed, proving that Taryn wasn't the only one who had inherited the sharp mind of the Hapan Royal House.
"We're helping," Taryn insisted.
Zekk clenched his jaw. "If anything happens to the two of you…"
"We're not completely helpless," Trista said, she pulled out a vibroblade and expertly twirled it across her fingers. "After all. We're going to be in the Queen Mother's elite guard when we grow up."
"Fine, but at least contact your dad." Zekk hurriedly left the store. The large human and his followers were piling into several speeders. "Blast it."
"Relax, we have our own speeders," Taryn pointed to several red, sleek-looking top-of-the-line speeders parked across the way. "Come on, we'll get our big cousin to loan us one of them."
"Taryn, Trista?" a male Hapan raised an eyebrow at their approach. "The store did not have the parts we needed?"
"Something came up, Aleson," Trista said. "This is Jedi Knight Zekk. He needs to borrow one of our speeders."
The Hapan crossed his arms and looked Zekk up and down. "*He's* a Jedi?"
"He's the one who brought down the roof of Queen Mother Teneniel's room," Taryn nodded. "Take my word for it, cousin. He's definitely a Jedi."
"I promise to return it in one piece," Zekk nodded. "But I really need one of your speeders now. We're tracking a Yuuzhan Vong spy."
"Nevertheless, I have orders too…"
"Space your orders, Aleson!" Taryn hissed, glancing back anxiously towards the rapidly disappearing speeders in the distance. "Just because you're in line to be promoted to Dukat doesn't mean you have to act like an ass already. Be one after you get your promotion, not before."
"Your father…"
"We'll go with the Jedi to ensure that the speeder remains in Hapan hands at all times," Trista said, a bit more diplomatically. "Now, we're in a bit of a hurry, so can you move?"
The Hapan male glanced back and forth between the two sisters, before massaging his forehead and nodding. "As you command, Ladies Trista and Taryn. But this is your choice and your father is guaranteed to be most displeased."

"Thank you," Trista said. She walked to the back of one of the speeders and unloaded two folded up speeder-bikes. She and Taryn expertly reassembled and had them in working order in the blink of an eye. They both pulled up their hair and put on protective helmets and goggles. In their leather tunics and matching boots and gloves. they were indistinguishable from each other. "You have the speeder. We'll cover you, Jedi Zekk.
Zekk climbed into the speeder under the watchful and distrustful eye of their older cousin. "Alright. Let's go."
)-(VII)-(
Jacen was once again shaking his head as he and Tenel Ka read the report that had just come in over breakfast. Transmitted via Taryn and Trista Zel's father, who had subtly expressed great displeasure that the Jedi had co-opted his daughters for a dangerous mission, the information was surprising to say the least. Anakin Solo was making a bid to retake Hutt Space and include the Hutts into the newly formed Galactic Federation of Free Alliances.
"I take a single month off and my brother's already doing the impossible yet again," Jacen said. Despite the slightly tart taste of the Sea Puffs cereal he had been eating, there was no harshness or bitterness in his tone. Just pure amazement. "Although what are Taryn and Trista doing on Tatooine?"
"Tracking smugglers," Tenel Ka replied openly. "Not all of the Ni'Korish were killed in the civil war. Many survived. These ones were smuggling weapons into and out of this system to our enemies. I had Taryn and Trista's father tracking these smugglers to see where they went. The two of them went along for field experience. Based on this report, however, it appears the situation was a lot more serious than I anticipated."
"I'll say," Jacen agreed. "Smugglers connected to a Hutt connected to the Yuuzhan Vong fleet out of Hutt Space."
"Jana," Tenel Ka looked to her attendant.
"Your Highness?"
"Please clear my schedule for the near future."
"As you wish."
Jacen raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Are we going somewhere?"
"In a way, it is fortunate that these smugglers are Hapan," Tenel Ka commented mildly in answer.
"Fortunate?"
"Yes, it gives me reason to assist your brother in his endeavor. Hapes cannot allow its fugitives to endanger galactic peace after all."

"Of course. But wouldn't Tatooine be surprised if a Hapan fleet dropped out of orbit above it?"
"They would if I decided to bring one," Tenel Ka shrugged. "The *Rock Dragon* is more than sufficient for tracking down these criminals."
"You…"Jacen blinked. "You're going personally?"
"Indeed. Perhaps, if the Queen Mother is seen assisting in the recapture of Hutt Space, the Hutts will also be inclined to make their own treaties with the Hapes Consortium," Tenel Ka said, a smile twitching at the corner of her lips. "At least, that is what I will tell the rest of the nobility."
"Your dad only just stopped taking those anti-acids the doctors gave him," Jacen said, shaking his head in amusement.
"But I will be going in an official capacity," Tenel Ka said in a tone that made Jacen blink in surprise. Was she pouting? No, she couldn't be. Tenel Ka didn't pout. "A treaty with the Hutts will definitely benefit Hapes in more ways than one. And the chance of a successful treaty is increased if I am there personally for the negotiations."
"You really want to get out of this palace again, don't you?" Jacen chuckled.
"Fact." Tenel Ka's grey eyes glittered brightly. "Perhaps I have not completely forsaken my Dathomiri heritage."
"I do not even want to know what that implies, daughter," Isolder remarked just as dryly, as he entered the room. He then switched roles. "Forgive the interruption, Queen Mother, but nobles from the Sivoria, Novi, and Farnica systems are here to discuss the trade dispute they are having with the Galactic Alliance government. They still claim that war is not a legitimate excuse to be late on a several billion credit debt and that they are perfectly within their right to add the two hundred percent tax to any future transactions."
Tenel Ka regarded her father, glanced to Jacen, and then nodded slowly. "I will leave this up to your superior judgment, father. You have more experience with these negotiations than I."
Isolder inwardly, and outwardly, winced. "And what shall I tell the nobles you are doing, your Highness?"
"I will be solidifying a deal with the Hutts that will benefit all of Hapes, not just a few families in three of the systems of the Consortium. It is a cause more worthy of my time and effort, don't you think, father?"
Isolder looked pleadingly to Jacen. "Well, Jedi Solo. What say you as to the Queen Mother's plan? Will we not be better off sending a diplomatic team to Tatooine to negotiate in her place?"
Now it was Jacen's turn to look back and forth between the other two. "Having the Queen Mother leave the safety of the Hapan Palace, not to

mention Hapan space in general, *is* taking a risk." He felt a rising tide of fury, as well as images of his rather painful death, spike out from his childhood friend and quickly got to his point. "But Hapes would benefit from the additional alliance. Just because the Hutts will join the Galactic Alliance doesn't mean Hapes can't have its own treaty to establish even stronger relations. The Hutts would be more inclined to negotiate if the Queen Mother herself made an effort to come out to them."
Isolder's shoulders slumped in surrender. "Very well. I wish you luck on your negotiations, Queen Mother. And I also wish for your very speedy return and resolution."
"Thank you father," Tenel Ka said stoically, despite the fact that she was irradiating joy. "I shall endeavor to further add to the well-being of the Consortium."
Isolder made a dismissing motion as he gripped his forehead with his other hand. "Then you best leave soon. There is talk that tomorrow several noble families will bring forth some rather tiresome petitions."
"You truly are the best father a daughter can ask for," Tenel Ka said good-naturedly.
"And you truly are your mother's daughter," Isolder muttered. "Take good care of her, Jedi Solo. For the sake of Hapes and my sanity."
"I will, sir." Jacen shared in Tenel Ka's amusement of the situation. "I will."
)-(VIII)-(
Alema Rar was bored.
On one hand, she was no longer on Mon Calamari anymore. She had grown tired of watching the shifting waves and the smell of sea salt. On the other, she was now stuck on one of the many vessels going to reinforce Anakin and the others on Tatooine. A destination still a week and a away thanks to the convoluted nature of the hyperspace lanes and the ever-shifting lines of war.
Fortunately, she wasn't the only one who was bored. Glancing across the rec-room towards a young human girl absently flipping through several holomags, an idea came to Alema.
"Hey Jysella."
The young almost-teen looked up. "Alema?"
"Come on, get up."
"Huh?"
"Stand up," Alema said with a toothy grin. "I know I promised your dad I wouldn't. But, if you're as bored as I am, this should be fun."
"What do you have in mind?" Jysella said warily, putting down her datapad.

"I'm going to teach you a couple moves that'll really help you when you get older. Starting early never hurt anyone."
"Moves? Like fighting moves?"
"Something like that," Alema smiled. She shucked off her vest so that she was left with just her thigh-high boots, form-fitting pants, and tank-top. She then made a gesture towards the HoloNet screen and put on some music. She smiled at the first tune that came on. It was a primal, drum-beat mixed with a haunting melody from a variety of reed instruments. "I'm going to show you some dance moves that'll be sure to get the guys fighting over you. I figured since you're twelve now, you'd appreciate them."
"Appreciate what, the moves or boys?"
"Both."
Jysella grinned gamely. "My dad is so going to have a fit if he ever learns about this."
"That's why it can be our secret," Alema said brightly. "The key to any dance is to remain limber and flexible. Very flexible. You have to have rhythm too. Fortunately, being Jedi, we practically have all three drilled into us at an early age."
"Tell me about it," Jysella made a face.
"Right," Alema stretched out her leg muscles in an exaggerated fashion, motioning for Jysella to do the same. "Dancing is all about matching the rhythm. You can have the greatest moves in the galaxy, but without rhythm, you'll just look foolish. That's why some of the best fighters are also the best dancers, and vice versa"
"I read about the Echani in my studies," Jysella nodded in understanding. "They take dancing and fighting to a whole new level."
"Exactly. Just as you can find out a lot about a person by the way they fight, you can also learn about someone by the way they dance." Alema began to sway and twist to the beat. "Dancing is also one of the oldest mating rituals in this galaxy. An instinct that is best experienced and not taught. You have to find your own rhythm. Something that defines who you are. If it helps, reach out into the Force and see the world through it. The heartbeats and life around you provides their own music, its own tune, with which you can sync yourself to. Use the background music to get you started. Then use the Force to continue."
Jysella closed her eyes, focusing on the Force around her. Alema's radiant presence was directly in front of her. Her brother several decks below with his friends. They may have been on a metal ship, but it had its own life in many different ways. And as the Force presence of the others reflected her sonar-like pulse, as her heart began to beat in tune to the background music, she too began to rock back and forth.

"That's it," Alema whispered, already finding the idea a lot more fun than she thought it would be. "Just start by swaying and bouncing. Let the Force push you around like a breeze. You'll find the way you dance, your moves, differ depending on who you're performing for. It's still you in charge, you dictate how they respond. Don't try to force it or rush it. Just do what feels right."

The Twi'lek's own body lean forwards seductively, then pull back, hips rolling as she did. Her feet slid in intricate designs across the deck floor while her upper torso fluidly moved back and forth. Her arms intertwined and weaved through the air around her like graceful ribbons. It was similar to the lightsaber forms Jysella was studying, yet different. The lightsaber forms were meant to repel others. This form was meant to entice.

The music of the Force and from the HoloNet player continued to pulsate in Jysella's mind, Alema's occasional coaching was almost hypnotic as the Twi'lek blended her words with the natural rhythm around them. Jysella was dancing, yet unaware of the steps. In tune with the Force, letting it move her body. Gradually, the room faded away, the artificial music disappearing as she felt only the vibrations of the Force in her trance-like state. The living beats of the people around her.

It was strange, it wasn't how she had been taught to view the living Force around her, yet it felt right as she immersed herself in rhythm created by the pulsating lives that surrounded her. Each person had their own presence, their own beat, which sounded in perfect harmony with the rest of the crew aboard the ship. The Force working through every living being, the cadence of the thought processes of different species, a natural chorus of notes that moved her body. It was amazing and primal, and Jysella briefly wondered why she had never heard such a sound before.

Next to her, Alema added another step into their dance, and Jysella's mind would subconsciously adapt it to the steps she was already performing.

Fast. Slow. Swirling. Dipping. Arching their backs and whipping forward like tightly stretched cable. They continued to move, their breathing becoming labored as they lost themselves to the music of the Force. To their own feelings and memories.

They were both dancing on instinct now, connected to each other through the Force. To the rhythmic beating in their souls. Their steps began complimenting one and other. Their moves different, yet keeping in time with the actions of the other. They began to speed up.

Feet sliding across the ground. Bodies bobbing and weaving. Eyes closed in concentration.
Eventually, the music came to a rising crescendo and the beat was finally over. Their eyes opened slowly. Both were panting, grinning at each other as sweat dripped from their foreheads. Jysella realized that the HoloNet had been turned off for a while, and that they had been dancing solely to the rhythm of the Force for nearly a half-hour.
"Wow," Jysella panted, a broad grin on her face.
"Yeah," Alema smiled softly, looking happy, but sad at the same time. "I used to dance with Numa a lot when she was alive. I haven't really danced like that since I lost her. You were almost as good as she was in her prime."
"Really?" Jysella whispered.
"Mhm," Alema placed a gentle hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "We had steps ingrained into us before we became aware of the Force. Steps we were forced to perform to please our masters. Steps we had to unlearn once we became Force aware. You, however, are just learning. You'll probably go much farther than the two of us ever could."
"But I wouldn't have known where to start without you." Jysella said. "I've never seen...heard...the Force like that before. Tomorrow, can you teach me more?"
Alema nodded, her throat momentarily stuck. "Yeah."
"I'll try to do Numa justice," Jysella pledged sincerely. "And besides, even if she's gone, she's still with the Force. Who's to say that she wasn't dancing with us anyways?"
Alema closed her eyes and let out a small, weak laugh. "Yeah, she probably would have been with us. She always did like a good party."
"She sounds fun."
"She was," Alema's smile was gentle and genuine as her eyes momentarily grew distant and watery. "Thanks for the dance, Numa. Jysella"
From the doorway of the room, unknown to either of the two Jedi, Corran Horn looked on with a soft and sympathetic smile on his face. His wife, standing next to him, wrapped her arms around him lovingly.
"She's getting better, isn't she?" Mirax whispered.
"Getting there," Corran murmured, kissing the top of Mirax's head. "She's getting there."
)-(IX)-(
Tyria Sarkin-Tainer was millimeters from the emotion known as panic. The local HoloNets were going on about how security forces had

stopped an armed uprising, Sannah was missing, and Doran was unconscious and who knew where.
"What? What do you mean the *Dancing Droid* took off?" Tyria said incredulously.
"She mentioned something about checking out a droid facility on Onadax. You know she can't resist those," Alexandra Winger said in exasperation.
"But she had to go now out of all times?"
"Tyria?"
Tyria did her best to run through several calming exercises in her mind. "Things have taken a turn for the worst. Have you picked up anything unusual on your end?"
Alexandra Winger's *Webley II* was stationed on the Bakuran side of their border with the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium. *"Not a peep. And that's strange. There aren't even any patrol vessels or security ships within several lightyears of either side of the border."*
"And you know this how?" Tyria groaned. There was something about having an independent streak that was both good and bad. On one side, you were more inclined to take the initiative. On the other, your team work left much to be desired. And of course, since she and Doran mostly encountered the independent types in their adventures, most of the time they were just lucky to get out alive.
"Hey, had to check to see if they were massing for an invasion. Doesn't look like it though. If what you told me is true, and the P'w'eck really have overthrown their masters, it could account for the porous borders."
"So you believe Lwothin's story?"
"I didn't say that," Alex shook her head. *"I mean, it's too good to be true. If the P'w'eck really have overthrown their masters, there should have been some sign of a fight. There should have been a last ditch effort by the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium to retake Bakura in order to establish a final stand. The population would have provided a ton of entechment materiel. As zealous as the Ssi-ruuk are in their beliefs, I can't see them just fading away."*
"Alright," Tyria muttered. "Stay alert. The Prime Minister is currently negotiating the terms of a treaty and is trying to get this Keeramak guy to come to the planet to ratify it. From the sounds of it, it looks like Cundertol might be the one going into Ssi-ruuk space instead."
"I've put in a call to several buddies of mine in the New Rep government. We have a guaranteed cruiser-frigate support if the situation calls for it. Both the Pride of Selonia and Mon Adapyne are

moving their areas of operation to nearby systems for the foreseeable future."
"Thanks Alex, you're the best."
"And don't you forget it. Webley II, out."
The hologram of Force sensitive Captain Winger faded out and Tyria slumped back into the cockpit chair of her ship. Not for the first time was she regretting her decision to take Doran and Sannah to the planet. Yet, it was clear that trouble was afoot. Trouble that needed Jedi attention. Now if only Doran hadn't inherited both her own and Kell's sense of curiosity and stubbornness. And while she wasn't as close to Sannah in the Force, the disappearance of the Melodie teen after the uprising was more than worrying.
Tyria took another breath to steady herself. She just had to trust in their abilities and hoped they knew what they were doing. In the meantime, she'd go have another talk with Lwothin and Cundertol to see just why this treaty wasn't sitting well with her stomach.
)-(X)-(
Sannah took in what Malinza and the others were telling her with an open mind. Though she naturally disagreed with their view that the Jedi were the bane of the galaxy, she understood where they were coming from. She also agreed with their view regarding how the New Republic had treated Bakura after the Ssi-ruuk invasion. She too would be angry if people came to Yavin Eight, mined it for resources, and left only their trash behind in exchange. Of course, the fact that most of the Bakuran Defense Force vessels had been destroyed at Fondor by Anakin Solo in a New Republic-led operation didn't make things any better either.
Yet Sannah's genuine desire to help improve the situation was apparently picked up on by the five members of the Freedom movement and they went further into depth with the problems plaguing the planet.
Cundertol, in their opinion, was a closed-minded puppet of the New Republic and resembled everything that was wrong with the planet. He had only been re-elected because of a technicality in the last vote, well if you could call it a vote, seven months ago. The main front runners either withdrew or were found dead in mysterious circumstances. The candidates who were left didn't even stand a chance against the man who promised a new era for Bakura and closer friendship with the New Republic.
Their military was spineless, unable to say no to the levies imposed on them by the New Republic. Though Malinza and the others agreed that Yuuzhan Vong would be bad for the galaxy over all, they also despised

the current status quo. It would have been nice if the Bakurans had at least some say in how their men, women, and resources were used by the larger galactic government. Goodwill only went so far.
And all of their anger and frustrations, reinforced by their belief of a universal Balance, were heaped onto the Jedi as the main actors in a corrupt government. Sannah supposed she should be thankful that they were willing to give her a chance in the first place, given how hostile their views were.
"Cundertol controls the planet with an iron fist," Malinza concluded. "You'll see only what he wants you to see. Hear only what he wants you to hear. In actuality, he has duped the other so-called leaders of this planet into following him into this 'new era.' The arrival of the P'w'eck have only reinforced his position as an ambassador of peace and goodwill."
"Wouldn't an alliance with the P'w'eck only help the people of Bakura, though?" Sannah asked, curiously. "Any treaty Cundertol makes with them would only secure the safety of this planet."
"We're not exactly arguing against the treaty. We're only arguing about how Cundertol is going about doing it," the blond, pony-tailed young woman, Jjorg said with a shake of her head. "He's unilaterally speaking for the entire planet when a majority of us aren't even aware that the P'w'eck are here. Any terms he's worked out so far are terms only he and the higher ups in the government know. He hasn't asked the people of Bakura if we even *want* a treaty with the P'w'eck."
"It's like he's having us change masters again," the quick-to-anger human male, Zel, said. "Now that the New Republic is going down in flames, we're jumping ship and handing our safety and security to another government? It just isn't right. When are the people of Bakura going to have their own voices and dictate how they live their own lives?"
Sannah glanced back and forth between the leaders of the Freedom. Their views were on different ends of the spectrum politically, but they were all united by the perceived lack of voice of the Bakuran people. Swallowing, she nodded slowly. "As you know, the New Republic has recently restructured itself into the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances. I can't promise anything until I talk with my master, but it's possible we can renegotiate the relationship between the Galactic Federation and Bakura. Ensure that it's a fair one this time. If you are willing to give the Jedi and Galactic Federation one last chance, maybe we can work things out to everyone's benefit."
"Another chance to stab us in the back?" Salkeli, the Rodian member of the group protested. "We know how you Jedi work. You speak fancy

words and glittery promises, but the moment you leave, everything goes back to the way it was. Just because the leaders you served decided to change the name of your government doesn't mean they have a clean slate."
"Salkeli, this *is* the first time the Jedi have come here since the war began," the fifth member of the group, Vyram said. "Maybe we should…"
"Should what? The last time the Jedi were here, we got ourselves locked into a treaty with the New Republic. We get saved from becoming enteched, yet the New Republic drains the livelihood out of our population and resources anyways," Salkeli cut off. "You agree with me, right, Zel?"
"Yeah," the young man seemed to have grown incensed by the Rodian's words. "We've given your government plenty of chances, and all they've done is take advantage of us. Why should this time be any different?"
Sannah blinked at the level of hostility emanating from the two. Even the other three members of the Freedom were silent, waiting for an answer. After growing up around Jedi, around people who looked up to them, the young Melodie teen wasn't exactly used to the enmity being directed at her and the order she served. Though she had seen enough on the HoloNet, seeing and experiencing were two different things.
"It'll be different because I'll make sure it is," Sannah said determinedly. "You know that I agree that what the New Republic has been doing to Bakura hasn't been fair. You also know that a Jedi keeps his or her word once given. If the Jedi upset the Balance, it is their responsibility to undo the damage they helped create. I give you my word that I'll help you ensure a better future for Bakura. If you feel you're best served breaking away from the Galactic Alliance, then I won't stop you. But if you give the Galactic Alliance the same chance you've given me, I swear things will get better."
"Again fancy word…"
"Fine," Malinza said, cutting off Salkeli. "One last chance."
"Malinza!" Both Salkeli and Zel protested.
"One last chance," Malinza repeated, a level gaze on the Melodie teen. "She's right. It's up to the Jedi to fix the unbalance in this galaxy. Unbalance they caused. The last generation was too self-centered, believed themselves too important to the galaxy to fall, and they did. At least the students Uncle Luke is teaching have learned from those mistakes. But Jedi Sannah, I'm holding you to your word. You represent not only your entire order, but the government it serves."

"The Jedi serve only the Force," Sannah corrected softly. "If we discover that Bakura is better off seceding from the Galactic Alliance, I'll help negotiate that treaty when it comes to it. Thank you for the chance, though. I promise you won't regret it."
Malinza nodded. "I'm sure I won't. Now, let's see what we can do about *your* problem. The Salis D'aar Penitentiary is nearly jail-break proof. They have a triple layer security system even before you get inside. Droids and human guards patrol the perimeter, along with a network of sensors that detect anyone approaching the main entrance."
"So how do we get in?" Sannah asked.
"The Salis D'aar Penitentiary has the same weakness all super-jails and fortresses have," Vyram said. "Though they have an enclosed waste-management system and their own food-processing plant, they still need to get their water from outside."
"The Salis D'aar Reservoir, to be exact," Jjorg finished. "It's two kilometers away and less secure than the actual prison. The piping goes underground through several meters of rock, and ends up just inside the prison walls."
"Won't the prison guards be wary of this weakness?"
"The trick is not alerting anyone on the Reservoir side of the piping," Malinza said. "The security may be lower there, but the alarm system is top notch. If any of the droids or guards get suspicious, automated fail-safes close off the pipes in several sections. Anyone trapped inside either drowns or gets sliced apart by the laser fences within the piping. That's where you can come in handy. Just do your Jedi mind-trick on the guards and we can handle the droids."
Sannah bit her lower lip at the obvious illegality of what they were planning. "And you're sure I can't just go and ask the Prime Minister to release Doran?"
"You can try," Malinza shrugged. "But you'll tip your hand and the guards at the prison will be too alert for our plan to work."
Sannah glanced back and forth between the members of the Freedom again. The stories of Anakin and Tahiri's exploits came to the forefront of her thoughts, and she knew in a second what either of them would have done were they in her place. Gulping nervously, she nodded. "Fine. We'll do it your way."
Malinza smiled faintly. "Hope that didn't hurt your Jedi values too much. Get some rest. We'll move mid-day. It's risky, but who in their right mind would break someone out of jail mid-day?"

)-(XI)-(

The campfire crackled within its stone hearth as the Sand People roasted some of the large pieces of meat gifted to them by Tahiri,

Anakin and Shaeri. The three teens were all wrapped up from head to toe in cloth, in a close imitation of the Sand People's own garments. It was partially out of respect for the culture, but also because the full wrap was best to maintain body-heat in the cold desert nights.
Not that Anakin was bothered by the cold. He was currently entertaining several children and older Sand People by having flames from the campfire dance around his hand. The flames would occasionally form animals, from bantha to womp-rat, or become dancing or fighting figures. Despite the natural Sand People wariness for those with the Force, he had them all enthralled.
Since this was the first time Tahiri had the time to actually see Anakin's pyro-kinesis at work in a non-violent manner, she was both amused and impressed by his control. Even with all the changes she had undergone the past year and a half, it was clear that she wasn't the only one who had grown. Anakin's confidence and spirit was at an all-time high. He just exuded power subconsciously, making all those around him want to follow him without question. What was best was that she knew he wasn't even aware of it. Wherever he had gone when he had left Borleias, it had refined his abilities, gotten rid of his doubts and fears, and given him a new focus.
"The two of you are mated?" Vexa asked mildly from behind Tahiri.
Startled by the blunt question, Tahiri was glad that her face was covered by a standard Tusken veil. Her cheeks flushed as the memory of her first time with Anakin over a month earlier came rushing back; her first time and the morning after. Waking up in his arms, her body pleasantly sore and pressed up against his, with the strongest of emotions flowing through their bond after what they had just shared, was something she could never forget. The memory was still as vivid as if it had happened yesterday. As her mind wandered back to that moment, she closed her eyes and the Force helped her relive that equally special morning.
"Hey," Anakin whispered as she stirred in his arms.
"Hey." Tahiri lazily stretched against him. She grimaced as parts of her protested the movement and quickly used the Force to soothe her aching muscles; another benefit to being a Jedi. Anakin's hands gently ran over her body, helping abate any lingering soreness with their bond. She nuzzled him in appreciation and sighed happily. With the soreness gone, she was left with a hazy warm feeling all over and a keen awareness of her body pressed alongside his.
She could hardly believe it, that they were now truly lovers in every sense of the word. Lovers and best friends. There was no awkwardness, no doubts between the two of them. Just their Force

bond and the reassuring presence of the other burning brightly in the Force beside them. Tahiri murmured his name as she just basked in the absolute contentment she was feeling. Even after the intimate night they had shared, there was nothing in the galaxy like waking up to the warmth and comfort of your childhood best friend, knowing that you were loved and supported. That you had a place you belonged.
"I love you, Tahiri Kwaad," Anakin voiced the emotions the both of them were feeling in a soft whisper full of wonder. His hand idly rested on the back of her head as he held her to him.
"*Love you too, Hero Boy. Always," Tahiri murmured softly.*
She tucked herself against his chest, just listening to the beating of his heart. His thoughts and other emotions were unshielded from her for the first time in a very long while. His love for her, his amazement at what they had shared, mirrored her own feelings for him. Making love had only strengthened what they had, made them that much more unbreakable. He was hers just as much as she was his, and nothing in the galaxy was going to take him from her, she was sure of that now. Whatever the galaxy threw at them, whatever adventures that laid in store, she knew that they'd face it together.
Anakin picked up on her thoughts and she felt him smile against her hair as he kissed her forehead and mentally agreed with her. <u>Together.</u>
Tahiri closed her eyes. She just felt so safe, warm, and happy all at once. The security and stability she received from their bond was the backbone for who she was, gave her the confidence and strength needed to face the galaxy, and most importantly, reassured her that she wasn't alone—that she had someone who loved her and would back her up no matter what. With Anakin holding her, their bond completely open and their thoughts nearly one, Tahiri felt as if the rest of the galaxy didn't even exist at the moment. It was just her and Anakin, just the way it should always be.
"Tahiri?"
Brought back to the present by Vexa's voice, Tahiri shook herself. She took a moment to recall Vexa's question, and then another to shyly glance across the camp at Anakin. From the faint blush on his cheeks, it was clear he had relived the moment right along with her. Unable to keep herself from grinning, she held her head up proudly. "We are."
"It is clear from the way the two of you look at each other," Vexa said. The leader of the tribe took a seat on a rock next to Tahiri. In her hand was a gourd full of the traditional broth consumed by the Sand People. "Of course, it was clear all those years ago that the two of you would end up together."
"It was?"

Vexa merely tilted her head, as if she had just heard a ridiculous question. "Not many boys who are not of the tribe will willingly go through the coming-of-age rite with a girl he only knew for less than a year."
"Yeah," Tahiri smiled fondly. "I guess it is kind of obvious when you put it like that."
"And you return with another who appears to be just as worthy," Vexa motioned with her gourd to Shaeri.
The Yuuzhan Vong Freed One had easily earned her place among the tribe. Despite being crippled, she had bested one of the warriors who had challenged her. Though he had underestimated her, a victory was a victory. Even now, she was showing some of the Sand People several basic Yuuzhan Vong moves with her amphistaff.
"Shaeri's amazing," Tahiri said softly. "Not many girls her age can completely leave her people and way of life to fight against everything she grew up knowing."
"As I said, you attract strength," Vexa said.
"The tribe has done well since I last saw it," Tahiri motioned to the number of children gathered around Anakin's fire-show. "I do not recall seeing this many children when I was last here."
"Many of the children are orphans now, due to the treachery of the Hutts," Vexa's voice took on a steely inflection. "But they will grow knowing the names and deeds of their parents."
"As they should," Tahiri murmured.
Vexa reached into the folds of her robes and pulled out a small box. It was too dark for Tahiri to see any details. "Before Sliven joined the ancestors, he had us return to the home of your tribe."
Tahiri's thought processes ground to a halt. Despite everything that had happened to her, there were three names she would never forget. One was Anakin's. The others were Tryst and Cassa Veila, her birth parents. She had learned about them after passing the coming-of-age ritual during her last stay on Tatooine. "You did?"
Vexa seemed reluctant to elaborate. "He wanted to give you an incentive to return again. As you know, that old man was sickeningly fond of you."
"I owe him my life," Tahiri nodded, ignoring Vexa's slight. There was no sense starting another argument with Vexa. She *was* helping them reach Gorga's hideout after all.
"Yes, you do," Vexa said, sounding pleased that Tahiri recognized this. "Before he passed, he made me promise to return this to you should you ever return to the desert."
Vexa handed Tahiri the small box.

In the flickering light of the fire, Tahiri could see that a slender, golden-chained necklace was wrapped around the smooth, wooden case. A simple, oval locket was attached to the necklace. Swallowing, Tahiri carefully opened the metal clasp. There was no picture inside, only two thumb-prints engrained in small, hardened, dabs of clay.
"Sliven told me that those prints are from your mother and father," Vexa said neutrally, though Tahiri could sense nothing but care and respect from the Tusken matriarch.
Tahiri removed one of her hand wraps and reverently brushed her own thumb over the other prints. A simple layer of transparent material, smudged with dirt, protected these last remnants of her parents. Parents she had never known.
"Thank you, Vexa." Tahiri whispered hoarsely, fighting back tears. She closed the locket and held it against her chest
"I was simply keeping a promise to the last leader of this tribe," Vexa shrugged.
Tahiri sniffled, leaning back into Anakin. He had moved behind her when he had felt the up-swell of emotion. His hands lightly squeezed her shoulders, before they looped around her in a supportive hug. That gave Tahiri enough strength to continue. She returned her attention to the box the necklace had been wrapped around, using the Force to anchor herself to Anakin's presence. Almost reverently, she lifted the wooden lid.
And gasped.
Inside was a lightsaber. But not just any lightsaber. The handle of the lightsaber was every bit as unique as a lightsaber could be. Wood had been expertly worked in tandem with strips of metal, creating very intricate designs up and down the hilt.
The metal was the natural ore that came out of the sands of Tatooine; stubborn to work with, easily corroded, and almost useless in nature. Yet the creator of the lightsaber had somehow altered it on a molecular level and stabilized it. The metal's silver-blue hues contrasted with the bands of ivory-gold wood that complimented it. The two materials overlapped, intertwined, and alternated throughout the length of the lightsaber's hilt. How the creator had worked both the wood and the metal, and enabled the materials to last for so long, was amazing in itself. But it was the design that was truly breathtaking. Painstaking detail and artistic talent had gone into the carving and creation of the saber's grip. Carefully set strips of wood and metal mimicked wind blowing across an expanse of desert. While two delicately carved, elaborate swirls at the top of the handle emulated the twin suns and the rays of light they cast.

Tahiri carefully lifted the saber from the box and images from another era flowed through her mind as the saber's rich history flared to life in response to her Force presence. She could see the focus at the center of the saber, a pure white krayt dragon pearl from an old and very large beast. She could see its life and death. Feel its essence in the pearl it left behind.

At once she knew that the saber had belong to her mother. It, however, had been created by her father as a wedding gift. She could almost envision Tyrst Veila, sitting at a desk, crafting the magnificent work of art for the woman he loved. Encapsulating everything they loved about the desert planet into saber. He had put his heart and soul into its very being, binding all the aspects of the planet they called home.

Tahiri could also feel her mother's own love for Tryst, echoing alongside his essence within the material of the saber. It was as if a small bit of Cassa Veila's soul had been imbued into the lightsaber to accompany the presence of her husband. Emotions and memories of another time, like a holovid on fast-forward, flashed across Tahiri's eyes. To know that her parents loved each other to such an extent… Tahiri didn't stop the happy tears that were streaming down her cheeks.

She opened her eyes and stared at the lightsaber in her hands in stunned awe. It truly was a sword of the desert. Trance-like, she stood and held the weight of the invaluable work of art. The warmth of the wood and the grainy coarseness of the metal against her bare hands only reminded her all the more of the planet's heat and shifting sands. Her thumb pressed the activating switch and a blade that was as white as the gleaming suns of Tatooine shimmered into existence like a mirage. It was a brilliant white blade that contained hints of blue and yellow depending on how one looked at it. What's more, the wooden segments of the grip of the saber pulsated with a warm light as the illumination from the blade shown through the porous material. This light gave the inlaid desert scene a new life, as if the scene was resonating with the power of the krayt pearl within.

The rest of the camp had gone silent, seemingly understanding the re-awakening of a once dormant power. The saber continued to glow in the darkness of the desert, far outshining the feeble light given off by the campfire. Slowly, and very reluctantly, Tahiri deactivated the blade.

Sliven's final gift to her.

She bowed her head, no words coming to her as she once again gave thanks to the Sand People and to Sliven. For more reasons than just giving her a piece of her history back to her.
After embracing her Yuuzhan Vong personality, being surrounded and constantly reminded of all things Yuuzhan Vong, here was something to definitively tie her to her human life.
To the way of the Jedi and the rich heritage that she had come from. Unlike most lightsabers, the one she held in her hand was every bit as alive as a Yuuzhan Vong amphistaff. She could feel the sweat and tears her father had poured into the weapon; the love her parents had for one and other. Feel the very essence of Tatooine. For a world that was supposed to be little more than a dead desert, Tatooine was very strong in the Force, and its presence hummed within the entirety of the lightsaber.
Like the locket before it, Tahiri clasped the lightsaber in her trembling hands and held it to her chest. Yes, she had embraced the Yuuzhan Vong. Had trained with them, lived with them, spoke their language and understood their culture. But, as the warmth of the saber in her hand reminded her, she would first and foremost always be a Jedi.
Tahiri was unaware of going to sleep, but when she next awoke it was very late and she could sense everyone else in the camp was asleep. She was tucked against Anakin's side, her mother's lightsaber held tightly in her hands. Anakin was still awake, absently running a hand through her hair, his emotions and thoughts completely open to her. She simply basked in his love and affection, taking a brief moment to send a mental thanks to her parents for reminding her who she truly was, before snuggling back up against her boyfriend and lover. The warm sand beneath them shifted in her actions and she emitted a contented sigh.
Never did she believe that she could feel so complete, so happy. She sent out another mental thanks, this time to Anakin. His brilliant, brilliant mind had somehow managed to find some way to get them back to Tatooine—her first real home—even during an intergalactic war. Back to Tatooine where she had found a piece of herself she hadn't realized was missing. She wouldn't be surprised if *he* had realized she was missing this planet. Missing a connection to the Jedi she hadn't known she needed. They knew each other better than they knew themselves. Which was good, because she thought she knew herself pretty well. Obviously not.
Pulling Anakin's comforting Force presence around her like a blanket, Tahiri set her mother's lightsaber aside and proceeded to show Anakin just how much she loved him.

)-(Chapter End)-(
A\N: A whole bunch of adventure under the suns next chapter.
Was planning to change the Jaina-kicks-thuggery-butt scene to a shoot-out at the main cantina a la Lego Star Wars, but I figured there were enough references to other Star Wars-verses hidden in the past few chapters that this chapter didn't need another.
The morning after flashback was brought to you by a request from Calyzar.
And thanks to Darksabre for reminding me of the story title: Tahiri's locket with her parent's thumb prints is a nod to Tahiri Solo's Rising Suns fanfic, one of the first A/T fanfics I read after reading SbS so very long ago.
Next update, next week.
Anon review responses:
Octavious Haye- Thanks a bunch, your review really made my day!
JediMasterDraco- As always, I really appreciate the time you take to leave your epic-length reviews. Makes writing this story all the more worth it. As for your dialogue between Anakin and Cal Omas, yup that's probably along the lines of what happened. (Although I don't think facing Voldemort was what either of them had in mind. The dark lords don't appear until the sequel).

ADA 34

Thirty-Four
)-(I)-(
The problem with trying to follow someone in the middle of the open desert was that you were in the middle of the open desert. There was no place to hide, and there was no one else around but you and the ones you were following. The five speeders that Zekk, Taryn, and Trista were chasing had opted to take care of the problem rather than try to lose their tail, sparking a high-speed chase across the shifting sand dunes.
Blaster fire sounded, mingling with the high whine of engines being pushed to their limit as four of the five speeders dangerously weaved in and out around Zekk's speeder and Taryn and Trista's speeder bikers. The fifth speeder, the one with the Yuuzhan Vong in it, continued towards its destination.
The desert whipped by them, filled with ruby red and emerald green lasers. Sand was kicked up from stray bolts and from the force of the vehicles' repulsors. All the while, the speeders and speeder-bikes

continued their high risk maneuvers as the pilots tried to do their best to kill each other.
After leading her pursuers on a breakneck, disorientating, zigzag chase through the gleaming sands, Taryn sent her speeder bike into a heart-attack inducing turn directly into the path of one of the enemy speeders. She killed the repulsors and slid herself to the side of her bike just as the enclosed speeder roared over her bike, bouncing as its own repulsors attempted to handle the unexpected jump. While still clinging to the side of her bike, Taryn fired off her own blaster, its bolts charring the enemy speeder's armored plating. The speeder, however, recovered and began to turn back towards her. But by then, the young Hapan girl had already flipped back into her seat and gunned the engines of her bike to pass by the slower and bulkier speeder.
The top of the speeder opened, and a gunman stuck his head out. Only to have a spinning vibroblade, thrown with deadly accuracy by Trista, embed itself in his forehead. Trista's bike flashed in front of the speeder chasing Taryn with barely a second to spare. Her own pursuers weren't as fortunate, and the two larger vehicles collided with an ear-shattering roar; bursting into flames and peppering the loose sand around them with shrapnel and debris.
The red-headed twins pulled their bikes to a halt to momentarily admire their handy-work, before grinning at each other and going off after the remaining two speeders.
The said speeders were currently bracketing Zekk's vehicle, and more thugs were piling out of both and onto Zekk's red Hapan speeder. Zekk was forced to set the autopilot as one of the thugs tried to skewer him with a vibroblade. He batted the hand aside and kicked the Rodian thug firmly in his chest. The thug let out a cry of surprise as he lost his balance and toppled off the fast-moving vehicles.
Another thug tried to blast the Jedi at point blank range, but Zekk used the Force and redirected the thug's arm so that the shot hit one of the enemy drivers. The speeder veered away from his own, completely out of control, before slamming into a rocky spire and detonating.
Meanwhile, Zekk was now engaged with three individuals bent on killing him. His robes billowed around him as he whirled around another vibroblade and backhanded the assailant in the back of the head. The assailant likewise toppled over the side of the speeder, making a divot in the sand.
Another blaster sounded as individuals from the remaining armored speeder took aim. Using a reverse choke-hold on one of the thugs trying to skewer him, Zekk used the body of the thug to intercept the shots, before throwing the corpse overboard. The last vibroblade-

wielding thug and the two other blaster-wielding thugs tried to coordinate their next attacks.
But Zekk had read their minds and was ready for them.
When the vibroblade thug tried to attack, Zekk gripped the man's arm and used the Force to hurl him and his buddies onto the front of the remaining speeder. His view hindered, the driver couldn't see the approaching arch of rock. Zekk dove into his pilot's seat and managed to steer his own speeder away just in time. The other speeder slammed into the rocky column and had several large boulders collapse onto its smoldering and burning form.
Zekk did his best to regain control of his breathing as he steadied his speeder's course. He then frantically looked over his shoulder for any sign of the two Hapan twelve-year-olds following him. Only when he saw them approaching did he finally allow himself to relax.
"You two okay?" He called out, as they brought their bikes alongside his speeder.
"We are," Taryn called back. "You?"
"I'm fine." He signaled and they all came to a stop.
"We've lost the last speeder," Trista noted, removing her helmet and goggles to shake them free of sand.
Zekk shook his head. "The Force will guide us."
"Where do you think he's going?" Taryn asked, accepting his comment. "The only thing out here is a whole lot of desert."
"Probably his ship or a secret base. A lot can hide out here."
"You think there'll be more Vong?"
"I'd bet on it," Zekk agreed. "All the more reason to stay alert. Just because we beat his buddies doesn't mean we can let our guard down."
"Understood, Jedi Knight Zekk," Taryn said with a mock-salute.
"I'm serious, Taryn," Zekk said, exasperated.
"We'll follow your orders, don't worry," Trista said, glowering at her sister.
Taryn pouted but nodded in agreement. "We'll listen. We like being alive too much to stop anytime soon."
"If there ends up being more than we can take, I want you two to leave and find Anakin or Jaina, then get back to your father. I don't need to tell you the political troubles we'll get the Jedi in if anything happens to the two of you?"
"We'll be careful, Zekk," Taryn said sincerely, bowing her head regretfully. "Promise."

Zekk exhaled, then affectionately mussed Taryn's copper hair. "Great. Then let's get going. The Force is telling me we still have quite a ways to go."

)-(II)-(

Jaina was enjoying her and Jag's little journey through the Dune Sea. The speeder they had taken had been packed to the brim with various foodstuffs and survival equipment. A stop-over at Jabba's old palace to dump off the captured thugs and ensure that their supplies were sufficient enough, and the next couple of days had been nothing but happy bliss. Who knew that sight-seeing the desert landscape of Tatooine's most prominent desert with Jag could be so fun?

"According to the speeder's nav-computer, we should reach our destination in another day," Jag commented, tilting the wide brim of his hat downwards.

"Or longer. There's no rush," Jaina shrugged, basking in the rays of the suns. With the Force she didn't have to worry about sunburns, and the past few days had given her a perfectly healthy tan.

It went without saying that with Jag being her only company under the twin suns, tan-lines were another thing she didn't have to worry about. It had been rare for the two of them to get anything more than a few stolen moments when they were on duty, but their trip through the desert had allowed them to more than make up for lost time. They had taken the chance to both have fun, but also learn more about the other without the constant threat of death and destruction. Whether it was exploring the jagged, rocky bluffs of the sandstone cliffs, creating sand sculptures, or star-gazing—and other pleasurable pursuits—from the comfort of their atmospheric-controlled, skylight-equipped tent, they had definitely made the best of the time they had been given.

Presently, they were both reclined at the top of a spire of towering rock several dozen meters high. Rock-climbing had been added to the day's schedule after they passed a small forest of rocky spires sticking out from the shifting sands. In another few millennia or so, the spires would be worn away by the constant bombardment of tiny pebbles, but for now, they were perfect to climb upon.

And to have a picnic on top of.

Jag opened the cooler they had brought up with them. "A drink?"

"Of course," Jaina grinned.

Jag produced several glasses and poured out of a thermos. He then brought out a bowl of fresh fruit with raised eyebrows. "Gorga's thugs definitely have exquisite taste. Several of these fruits are grown only in Chiss-space."

"All the better for us," Jaina grinned, popping a berry-like fruit into her mouth.
"When we first came to this planet, I have to admit, having a picnic in the middle of the desert was the last thing I thought I'd be doing," Jag commented, clinking his glass with Jaina's.
"Same here," Jaina chuckled. "Remind me to thank my little brother when we see him."
"Remind me to do the same," Jag noted, smiling as well.
They continued to banter as they ate, using electrobinoculars to survey the vast desert from their new vantage point. Soon, though, the picnic was over and it was time to move on once more. Jaina floated the cooler back down to their speeder and they climbed down after it.
"Alright. Let's see if we can find a krayt dragon now. I've always wanted to see one up close ever since Anakin told me about his first visit to Tahiri's tribe."
Jag glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. "The chances of a krayt dragon lair being on the same route as the direction we are heading are…."
Jaina kissed him to silence his statement, then tugged on the brim of his hat. "Never tell me the odds, flyboy. Now let's go."
Bemused and amused, Jag nodded and the two descended from their high perch to resume their vacation.
)-(III)-(
One of the advanced sentries let out a braying warning, and the rest of the traveling group immediately readied their weapons. Anakin, Tahiri, Vexa, and Shaeri made their way to the front of the group and looked through the lenses of several electrobinoculars. This was their fourth day of travel and they were getting close to their destination. Their current location, at the top of a mesa, gave them a magnificent view of the seemingly infinite desert around them.
"What is it?" Anakin asked softly.
"The scouts have spotted several speeders heading for Gorga the Hutt's enclave," Vexa said. She pointed across the desert towards two directions. "There and there."
Tahiri, Anakin, and Shaeri trained their electrobinoculars towards the first direction the Tusken matriarch had indicated.
"Is that….?"
"Jaina?" Anakin blinked in disbelief.
"And Jag," Tahiri nodded, confirming what Anakin was seeing.
The two shared bewildered shrugs and turned their gaze towards the other indicated direction. The lead speeder was enclosed, so they

couldn't make out anyone inside. But the following speeder was open and escorted by two speeder-bikes.
"Zekk?" Tahiri said, double-checking to make sure she wasn't imagining things.
"Wait, why does he have kids with him?" Anakin couldn't tell the identity of either speeder-bike riders because of their clothing, but he could tell by their size that they were very young.
"Why are you asking me?" Tahiri shrugged again. "I'm wondering why everyone's out here in the first place."
Anakin let out a sigh and closed his eyes. With minimal effort, he began to emit a pulsating call through the Force.
"Please let all but the closed speeder approach," Tahiri said to Vexa. "Our friends are on the other vehicles."
Vexa inclined her head towards the scouts, and they related a guttural message out across the sands.
Anakin continued to emit the pulsating call, and Tahiri watched as Jaina and Zekk changed their course and headed their way.
"I guess we'll find out the answer to your question soon." Anakin said, opening his eyes.
"What is it about us Jedi and somehow finding trouble, even when we're on our break?" Tahiri said with a shake of her head.
)-(IV)-(
Jaina, Jag, Zekk, and the Hapan twins weren't the only new arrivals to the camp of Sand People. Vexa had sent out messengers to nearby tribes while they had been heading towards Gorga's hideout, and several had responded, sending their own warriors to aid in the mission. The number of Sand People had practically tripled to just over a hundred and fifty, filling the top of the mesa with many temporary shelters.
Tahiri was having the time of her life among so many of the Sand People, fond childhood memories and her reconnection to the desert planet had her glowing with happiness. Shaeri, who only had Tahiri's stories to go off of for her preconceptions, was likewise finding her place. The warriors she had been showing her amphistaff to had invited the newcomers, and she was a constant center of attention.
Anakin, on the other hand, found himself in an awkward position as one who was both respected and feared. He learned from Vexa that the name 'Anakin' was actually a dreaded dark apparition in the Tusken lore. Though her tribesmen had grown used to his presence and knew better, the outside warriors weren't as enlightened. Apparently, warriors who battled other tribes would invoke the name 'Anakin' in hopes of laying complete and utter ruin onto their enemy.

And children grew up learning that even they wouldn't be spared should the great 'angry ghost' set upon their tribe.
Anakin Solo had a feeling that there was more to the story than Vexa had told him, but he also knew that she had broken a taboo just by telling him about the existence of the strangely-named ghost. Sand People weren't known for sharing their culture and practices to outsiders, so he didn't push the issue.
Meanwhile, the others—Jaina, Zekk, Jag, and Taryn and Trista—did their best to keep an open mind, but the stories they had heard of about the atrocities committed by the Tusken Raiders, and the various acts of infamy, kept them a bit edgy around so many heavily clothed individuals. The language barrier also made things difficult, especially for those not blessed with the Force.
"What is she saying?" Taryn said in exasperation as a Tusken girl about her height warbled at her angrily.
Zekk, whose understanding of the Force allowed him to clearly comprehend the young Tusken girl's words, only groaned and shook his head. "You're better off not knowing, Taryn."
Unfortunately, Tahiri, who was also listening, giggled behind the traditional Tusken veil she was wearing. "She says she doesn't see why Jedi Zekk is traveling with a stick-like, little girl like you."
"Tahiri!" Zekk blurted.
Taryn's grey eyes flashed dangerously. "What?"
"Ullaghariui is the daughter of one of the warriors of Vexa's tribe," Tahiri motioned. "Jedi have already proven themselves, but you're an outsider. Worse, to her, you and your sister are already pretty low in her eyes because you show your face and hands."
Taryn looked the fully clothed Tusken girl once over with a grimace. "Like I want to smell like feet wrapped in leathery burnt…"
"Tahiri," Zekk said again, turning a pleading gaze to her.
"This has to happen, Zekk," Tahiri murmured in a lower voice. "Ullaghariui isn't the only one who sees Trista and Taryn in that light. Until they prove themselves, cooperation isn't going to be easy, and we'll all need to work together without any issues to go after that Huttslime called Gorga. Remember, at nine years old, young Tusken kids are left in the desert for a bit to fend for themselves."
"Fine, but what about Jag…" Zekk glanced in Jag's direction and saw that Anakin had already facilitated a fight between the Clawcraft pilot and several warriors. Jaina—with a tarnished looking green krayt dragon pearl necklace glinting in the dying afternoon sunlight—was cheering the pilot on as he went hand-to-hand with one Tusken warrior. Jag blocked one attack before pulling the warrior into the path of a

second. A third shoulder-tackled him, but Jag rolled with it and flipped the attacking warrior away. "Never mind."
"Taryn," Tahiri called out. "A little background on the Sand People. Their women play for keeps."
"What does that mean?" Taryn blinked, while Trista was frantically shaking her head and mouthing for Tahiri to stop.
"The strongest women get to be with the strongest warriors. This ensures the continued strength of the tribe. I think Ullaghariui is making a claim for Zekk."
Both Zekk and Trista hung their heads in defeat while Taryn glowered at the Tusken girl. "Over my dead body."
"Tahiri, was that last bit really necessary?" Zekk said in disbelief.
Tahiri grinned, shrugging her shoulders sheepishly. "A little motivation never hurt. The more impressed the Sand People are with Taryn's fight, the more they'll respect her."
"You tell this little desert princess that if she wants a fight, I'll give her one!" Taryn jabbed a finger at Ullaghariui, too worked up to hear Tahiri and Zekk's conversation.
"So much for representing the Queen Mother and all of Hapes," Trista sighed, taking a seat next to Zekk.
Tahiri emitted a small warbling response to the young Tusken warrior girl, who tilted her head back superiorly. Tahiri then looked back to Taryn. "Knives or gaffi-stick? She's giving you the choice."
"It doesn't matter," Taryn huffed.
"What would you choose?" Zekk said to Tahiri.
"Ullaghariui's skilled in both, Taryn might have a better chance with the knife. But a gaffi-stick battle will earn her more honor."
"Then I'll choose the gaffi-stick!" Taryn hissed. "I'm going to beat this little desert princess at her own game. Zekk's mine!"
Zekk tried to melt into the hard rocky surface of the top of the mesa while his friends' amusement permeated the Force. "Taryn."
"I told you, didn't I?" Taryn said determinedly. "We Hapan women fight to get what we want."
"Taryn, you haven't even fought with a gaffi-stick before," Trista pointed out, rubbing her face in embarrassment.
"It doesn't look all that different from the ceremonial vibro-pikes we train with," Taryn said carelessly.
"I am definitely checking to see if we're related," Trista muttered, waving a hand dismissively. "Good luck, Taryn." She looked to Tahiri as her sister and challenger began the fight. "I assume I'll have to have some similar challenge?"
Tahiri nodded. "Yup."

Trista glanced at the crowd of younger warriors gathering around to watch her sister's fight. Only one of the young male warriors was staring at her instead of the two combatants, Trista motioned with a hand. "I'll take on that one."
Tahiri followed Trista's motion, then inwardly winced. "A'Rukven, the son of the weapon's expert."
"More honor in fighting him then?"
Tahiri blinked at how un-intimidated Trista sounded. It was as if the twelve-year old was discussing a question on an exam or some recipe for a cake. She allowed her eyes to wander over to where Taryn was now in a fast-pace duel with Ullaghariui, their gaffi-staffs sparking as they slammed into each other with audible and repeated clacks.
Then again, Tahiri reminded herself, Trista and Taryn *were* related to Tenel Ka. They may have been twelve, but depending on their demeanor, could pass for someone several years older, or younger.
"Yeah," Tahiri responded. "But only if you don't lose right away."
"Don't worry," Trista got up and began stretching. "The last thing I'll do is embarrass the name of Hapes. *Someone* has to uphold the honor it carries."
"Gaffi-stick or knife?"
"What's that weapon he's holding?" She motioned to the slender pole-arm weapon with a short, bayonet-like blade affixed to the end.
"Tusken ceremonial spear," Tahiri said. "It's an antiquated weapon by Tusken standards, a precursor to the gaffi-stick. It's supposed to be an indicator of his family's status and heritage."
"I'll choose that."
Tahiri flinched, making a mental note to keep any more Hapans as far away from the Sand People as possible. A matriarchal society against a primarily patriarchal society was just asking for trouble. To her surprise, however, the young Tusken warrior stood and held a hand up.
"I accept," A'Rukven announced in rough Basic. He made a motion, and one of the other warriors standing behind him disappeared, then reappeared with a similar pole-arm bladed weapon.
If Trista was surprised at his use of Basic, she didn't show it. She caught the weapon the young warrior hefted to her and tested its weight. "Impressive."
"It is my father's," A'Rukven said tonelessly.
"I am honored," Trista bowed her head politely. In the background, her sister's fight was still going on. Taryn was nicked with various cuts and scrapes, her breathing was labored, and sweat poured down her forehead, but still she fought on. Her opponent appeared to be tiring as well, the resounding clacks more infrequent than before as they both

sought to conserve whatever energy they had left. "I am Trista Zel, of the Royal House of Hapes."
"And I am A'Rukven, son of Rukvenghal," the robed warrior answered, he whirled his staff-weapon around.
"Shall we fight?" Trista arched a single eyebrow.
"We shall."
And the two suddenly lunged at each other, meeting in mid-air. Their staffs fought with each other, attempting to knock the other aside. The bladed-ends circled and pressed against each other, the metal poles jockeying for position. When neither gained the upper-hand, they both pulled their staffs back and flipped them so that their weapons were parallel against their backs. They circled each other like two predatory beasts, Trista's cold grey eyes every bit as mysterious as the lifeless slots of A'Rukven's Tusken mask.
A'Rukven slid one foot forward. Trista slid her own to the side. The two switched weapon-hands almost in unison. Then, they both attacked again, the bladed staffs swinging outwards in a sideways strike. Both passed through nothing but air. Though A'Rukven had a longer reach due to his arms being longer than Trista's, Trista was holding the staff weapon further down, halving her disadvantage. A'Rukven's blade sliced above Trista's head, while her own just made a small cut in his billowing robes.
The Hapan girl re-adjusted her grip in a flash, so that she was choking the bladed portion, and darted in, rolling under A'Rukven's next slice. When he tried to bring his weapon in, she used the pole of her weapon to bat it aside and then pressed the blade, flat-side down, across his thigh. Silence from their own audience filled the air as she withdrew. If it had been a serious fight, she would have just severed one of his vital arteries.
Her eyes searched his masked face with a hint of uncertainty, but A'Rukven inclined his head with respect. He then motioned with his hand, and Trista noticed that her leather armor bore a small indentation at her collar. He had also scored a 'fatal' blow.
"Again?" Trista smiled for the first time.
"Again," A'Rukven agreed. And the two launched themselves at each other once more.
)-(V)-(
"That's so cute," Tahiri whispered happily, resting against Anakin's chest and grinning at Zekk.
"Yeah," Anakin chuckled, reinforcing his sister's mental shields as he did. Jag, as bruised and battered as he was, had actually defeated his multiple opponents in hand-to-hand. He currently had Jaina tending to

his injuries—and rewarding his victory—in the privacy of one of the tent they had set up on the mesa.
Zekk smiled wanly, but didn't object to either of their comments. Both Taryn and Trista were asleep. Taryn was using his lap as a pillow, with his Jedi robe as a blanket, while Trista had fallen asleep leaning on his shoulder. At the moment, they definitely looked younger than their actual age. The transition between kick-butt warriors to cute and cuddly little girls was wholly baffling and amusing, though he was getting used to it. Their outgoing and energetic spirits simply added to his desire to protect the two of them.
Both girls had eventually lost their fights, but had more than gained the respect of the Tusken warriors. It was fortunate the assault on Gorga's base was still a day away. Taryn's fight had gone on until the early hours of the morning, when she and her opponent had practically passed out from exhaustion. Only a desperate attempt to end the fight, which resulted in her defeat, had finally stilled the two gaffi-sticks. Despite winning, through Tahiri's translation, Ullaghariui relinquished any claim towards Zekk; saying that she deemed Taryn strong enough to be the mate of any Jedi. That seemed to lift Taryn's spirits and, covered in countless cuts and bruises, the young girl had literally collapsed into Zekk's arms right after.
Trista and her own opponent had tied thrice more, before A'Rukven finally went all out. Even then, Trista had held him to a stand-still, until a mistimed sweep of her weapon allowed him to get the final, unmatched, 'fatal' blow in. In an attempt to help her feel better, Tahiri later told the Hapan girl that she was the first person in his age group to hold him off for so long. Trista just shrugged and mentioned that she might come back to Tatooine someday for a re-match.
With the matches for all non-Jedi over, all three had earned a tremendous amount of respect throughout the camp and a small feast had been thrown. Both to celebrate new alliances, but also to prepare the warriors for the coming battle.
"You truly have strong friends, Tahiri, Anakin," Vexa said from across a slowly dying camp fire.
"We do," Tahiri said with a nod. "They're what's gotten us through the war."
"With the Yuuzhan Vong," Vexa acknowledged.
"How much do you know about it?" Tahiri asked, curious.
"More than you would think. The people of the sand trade with many spacers, hear many things. The arrival of the Hutts only emphasized the seriousness of the war. But the people of the sand are not afraid.

Should the Yuuzhan Vong come, we will simply disappear into the desert."
"You aren't worried about the rest of the galaxy?" Anakin said.
"Should we be? We need only what this planet provides. Nothing more or less. It is the off-worlders who spoil the desert with their machines. Slay the krayt for sport. Encroach on our ancestral lands and kill our kin. If the Yuuzhan Vong come, it is because it is the off-worlders who have brought them here. We do not fear the Yuuzhan Vong, and would welcome their cleansing presence should they arrive."
Tahiri shivered in Anakin's arms. "But you know they won't let you live the way you want to, right? They'll only force their own rules and traditions onto you. You'd be trading one set of off-worlders for another, worse group."
"*I* do," Vexa said. "But not all the chieftains of the other tribes have such foresight. We will be fighting several who have allied with Gorga tomorrow."
"Why didn't you tell us?" Tahiri said, aghast.
"They would betray the desert for greed, another ailment brought by the off-worlders. They are no longer people of the sand," Vexa said simply.
"How divided are the Sand People in this matter?" Anakin said softly.
"The Sand People are not divided. The three tribes who have sided with Gorga are not Sand People anymore," Vexa replied shortly. "The Sand People will, as always, remain neutral in any galactic conflict. Our place is here, not among the stars. We are only helping you because Gorga attacks us and we desire to erase the three tribes who have betrayed the customs of our ancestors."
Tahiri slowly relaxed in Anakin's arms, relieved that Vexa and the others wouldn't eventually become future enemies. "And I thank you once again for your support, Vexa." She gripped the locket of the necklace now around her neck. "Thank you for everything."
)-(VI)-(
The number of Sand People had increased overnight, doubling in size. According to Vexa, this was the largest gathering of Sand People outside of the seasonal meetings of the tribes. Nearly three hundred warriors were now waiting for a plan of attack. The Jedi and their friends, and Vexa and several other tribal leaders, had gone on ahead to scout.
"And I thought Mos Eisley was a hive of scum and villainy," Jaina murmured in a low voice, gazing at Gorga's enclave through electrobinoculars.

The Hutt had made his base around a pit that had once housed a giant sarlaac. Surrounding the pit was a sprawling compound complete with sand-colored walls and mesh roofing, providing a perfect camouflage from prying eyes.
Unless one knew just how to look.
And when one did look, they saw many, many illicit activities and wanted criminals. It was like a black market bazar mixed with a job market for those who chose to forgo legal opportunities.
"I recognize those Duros from files we have at the palace," Trista muttered, training her own pair of electrobinoculars on another segment. "They're part of the Bane Consortium. Murderers for hire who have their roots way back into the Clone Wars."
"And there's our traitor of a cousin. Can't miss that red hair." Taryn added. "He's talking with those members from the Black Sun Remnant."
"Your cousin?" Zekk said.
"He sided with Alyssia during the civil war," Taryn nodded. "He's the smuggler we came here for. Well, he and his crew. But he's our primary target."
"I'll let dad know we found him," Trista said, separating from the group to speak into her comlink.
While Trista stepped aside, Zekk continued to scan the inside of the base with Taryn at his side. A slight tremor in the Force had him focus on two individuals standing by a gunship. He could just make out the ship's name, *Aube's Judgement,* before the individuals stepped up to its boarding ramp. "Look, those two over there. I think they're Dathomiri."
"Dathomiri? Like the former Queen Mother?" Taryn looked up at Zekk.
He closed his eyes and reached out with the Force. Both hooded figures stopped on the gunship's landing ramp and immediately turned around and glanced out at the distant desert. Zekk exhaled, shrinking his presence. The Nightsisters turned back to their ship and continued to board it. "Yup, definitely Dathomiri dark-siders," Zekk breathed.
"And we're just going to let them go?"
"It's a good thing they're leaving. They would have complicated things," Zekk confirmed, watching as the ship lifted off.
In the meantime, the others were analyzing the base's defenses. Anakin pointed to the area outside of the wall. "It looks like the Sand People supporting Gorga have their camps outside."
"Most likely a first line of defense," Jag said.
"Or cannon fodder," Tahiri growled.
"I was trying to be more diplomatic, but yes," Jag agreed.

"I count seven turbolaser batteries hidden in the sand," Jaina murmured. "Another eight towers that might have retractable batteries inside."
"Any direct assault will only get Vexa's people slaughtered," Taryn said nervously. "Us too."
"Heads up, we have a Yuuzhan Vong ship!" Anakin warned.
The group pressed themselves into the sand as best they could as an asteroid-like ship rose out of the base and headed off into the sky.
Zekk quickly whipped out his own comlink. "Saba, do you copy?"
"This one hearz you." Saba Sebatyne had stayed with the *Trickster* in Jaina's absence and was in geosynchronous orbit around the planet.
"We have a Vong scout ship taking off, can you intercept it before it leaves the system?"
"Yez. We are already moving to intercept."
"Zekk?" Taryn was puzzled by his sudden action. "I thought we were trying to stay inconspicuous."
"The Vong we were chasing already knows that someone is following him. He might be going back for help."
"Then wait," Jaina said quickly into her own comlink. "Saba, only make it look like you're trying to destroy it. But let them go."
"Let them go?"
"If we can draw an element of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet out here, without having to go into Hutt Space, we can fight a battle on our terms. The scout ship still needs several days to reach Nal Hutta, and our reinforcements will get here before that," Jaina reasoned. "If we're really lucky, the new Vong commander will come out here himself."
"Before we worry about the Vong, there's still the matter of Gorga's base. What is our plan of attack?" Jag said as Saba acknowledged the order and the comline went silent again.
"Can't we just do our Jedi thing? Break in, cause havoc, and while all that is happening, we create opportunities for our allies to attack?" Tahiri said with a tilt of her head.
"What type of attack plan is that?" Trista blinked, rejoining the group.
"One we resort about fifty percent of the time," Zekk said lightly.
"What's the plan for the other fifty percent of the time?" Taryn asked.
"It's similar. We break in, cause havoc, and then run like heck as everything blows up behind us." Anakin answered. "Sometimes we combine the two."
Tahiri looked to Vexa. "We'll go on ahead and neutralize the turrets. When you start seeing explosions and hearing laser fire, that's your cue to attack."

"Jag, Taryn, and Trista will stay back as well," Zekk said, well aware of the incredulous glares he was receiving from a pair of red-heads. "They know us the best so they can help coordinate our movements and we can use the Force to get in touch with them if something goes wrong."
"All the better reason we should be with you," Taryn said.
"You promised to follow my orders," Zekk reminded her.
Taryn made a face and looked away, before nodding. "Fine."
"Good luck, Jedi Zekk," Trista said solemnly.
"Thanks."
As the Jedi separated from the rest of the group, they all gave one last wave before linking up to a quasi-battle meld. With only the four of them, plus Saba, Tesar, and Lowbacca in orbit, the meld wasn't as effective as if there had been dozens of Jedi, but it was still better than nothing.
They moved quickly and quietly across the sands, using the Force to mask their presence. They stealthily bypassed the Tusken Raider camps and leaped over the dozen-meter high wall surrounding the base. The four spread out to maximize any potential damage they could cause, quickly blending in with the clientele.
Curious, Tahiri crept towards the remains of the sarlaac pit. A long ramp led into the skeleton of the large beast, the pit's walls reinforced with metal plating. Large cages containing rancors, a good-sized krayt dragon, and other vicious creatures, were lined up against a wall. Yuuzhan Vong shapers were running tests, drawing blood, and doing all sorts of shaper related work. Opposite, Gorga the Hutt looked on, looking pleased with himself.
"You see. Are they not magnificent?" The Hutt oozed. "The finest specimens I could provide. I hope your Supreme Commander remembers this when he hands me sole ownership of Nal Hutta. I provide only the best for my Yuuzhan Vong friends after all."
"That remains to be seen," a Yuuzhan Vong warrior barked. "Only after these beasts have proven themselves in the service of our gods will the Supreme Commander even consider allowing your return."
"Of course, of course," Gorga continued. "I even have some slaves we can use as sport. Or you can choose any of my men and you'll see just how effective these beasts are."
"A groveling Hutt, that's original," Tahiri muttered to herself, rolling her eyes. Shaking her head, she deftly climbed down into the pit, using the teeth jutting out through the gaps in the wall as handholds. She wondered how smug Gorga would be if the cages holding the very dangerous and angry animals suddenly—opened.

In the meantime, Jaina was following the bundles of wires that trailed out from the defense towers through the sand. All of the wires led back to a sand-colored building sitting against one of the far walls. It was a single-story stone structure with four guards playing cards at the entrance. A quick suggestion made them forget about her as she stepped past them and into the building.

Inside, a lone technician was absently flipping through a magazine while leaning back in his chair. Jaina walked up behind him and placed a hand on his head. He was a sleep a second later. She quickly glanced at the bank of computers he was protecting. It was an older model, one she had grown familiar with as a kid. With a smirk, she cracked her knuckles and quickly broke the feeble security protecting the very important systems the computer contained. Within seconds, she had selected the friendly-foe targeting parameters and ensured that things would become real interesting, real soon.

Zekk was of a similar mind. Once over the wall, he headed towards the landing strip he had spotted earlier. Still parked alongside it was a large variety of personal crafts; large cargo vessels, one-man fighters, and heavily modified gunships and patrol craft. All in a neat line. Enough of them were refueling—the fuel-lines trailing outwards to a refueling tanker at the end of the landing strip—to cause a very fiery chain-reaction. Zekk slipped under the tanker, one stripped wire and the removal of safety-cut offs later, the entire situation was one spark away from some impressive fireworks.

Elsewhere, Anakin had decided that shopping was the order of the day. Mainly in the bazar fully of highly illegal assassin and security droids. Almost all were military grade droids, completely armored and armed to the teeth with a handful of weapons that were just as illegal as the actual droids themself. For the few that weren't military grade, the explosives or lethal toxins packed within them made any argument about their functionality moot.

For Anakin, this was also his first time meeting militant Jawas. It was hard to imagine the bad-smelling, meter-tall creatures as a threatening force. But, in addition to their standard ion-blasters, these Jawas had heavy assault rifles or flame throwers strapped to their backs. The goods they sold were also a bit more dangerous than the often-times faulty wares sold by their more peaceful counterparts. He was surprised that these Jawas were still allowed to sell their goods, given that there were also Yuuzhan Vong warriors in a nearby barracks.

He would have loved to stick around and admire some of the very innovative handy-work that went into the droids—which were truly one-of-a-kind, and almost works of art—but he had a deadline to meet.

He subtly acquired the datapad with which the Jawas were using to reprogram the droids for their new masters, and inputted several codes of his own. It was just the standard kill-everyone-around-you command, with a three-minute timer that would overload the droid's power sources and create even more explosions. Whistling innocently, Anakin slipped the datapad back into the pocket of the Jawa he had taken it from and decided to get as far away from the market as possible.
Being linked together, the four Jedi knew exactly what the others had planned. This enabled the synchronization and execution of their chaos-inducing plans to be coordinated down to the millisecond. One moment, it was business as usual within Gorga the Hutts secret base. In the next instant, the Hutt found the rest of his day pretty much ruined.
)-(VII)-(
The battle was at the height of its fervor in a matter of seconds. All around, the guttural yells of the Sand People combined with a near ceaseless barrage of laser fire and explosions. The brutality and visceral combat the Tusken Raiders were renown for was played out all around and inside Gorga's base as the sand turned red and green from all the blood spilt. The three tribes allied with Gorga had been completely overwhelmed and outmatched, and now a swell of robe-wrapped warriors were flowing in from all sides. The few bands of organized opposition that had managed to form didn't last long. Bodies and droids littered the ground. With the ships inside the compound destroyed, the walls that had provided so much security were also proving to be a death trap. The various criminals and thugs had nowhere to run and began a desperate last stand. Somewhere in all the chaos, a terrified Gorga the Hutt was hiding as best as a Hutt could hide, whimpering at the roars, yells, battle cries, and pretty much every single sound echoing through the battlefield.
Adding to the chaos, were the frantic rampages of the krayt dragon and a lone rancor. They were the only surviving animals still alive, and they didn't seem particularly pleased with their captivity. They had already slaughtered the Yuuzhan Vong shapers and were running completely amuck.
"You just had to release the krayt dragon and rancors!" Anakin said in exasperation as he and Tahiri ran for their lives. Tahiri was being chased by the rancor, while Anakin had the misfortune of attracting the krayt dragon's attention.
"It seemed like a good idea at the time!"

They parted ways again, and Tahiri ducked under the burnt out hulk of what had once been a cargo ship. A second later, the rancor chasing them effortlessly lifted up the remains. Tahiri let out an eeep of alarm and resumed her run. The rancor hurled the remains of the ship and Tahiri was forced to drop to the ground as shrapnel exploded all around her. The rancor grabbed her as she struggled to get back to her feet, its large fist pinning her arms to her side. Tahiri gazed fearfully at the gaping maw of the creature as it got closer and closer. Suddenly, Jaina leaped onto the head of the rancor and drove her violet saber into its skull. The hand holding Tahiri slackened, and the blond Jedi wasted little time getting free. Jaina gave her a brief salute, before springing off the corpse and diving back into the battle.

Meanwhile, Anakin spotted a pocket of criminals blasting at a group of Sand People from behind a makeshift barricade. Anakin ran in their direction, bringing with him his gargantuan friend.

The criminals saw his approach and were about to open fire on him, until they saw what was following him. Self-preservation kicked in, and they abandoned their fort just as the krayt dragon trampled it into the sands. Its tail whipped out and sent several of the criminals flying through the air left and right. One thug wearing heavy-looking armor fired a grenade at the large creature. Said thug was promptly devoured by the enraged dragon. The krayt spotted Anakin again, and Anakin groaned, once again taking off and leading it in a circle around the base.

"Need any help?" Zekk called out when Anakin ran past.

"I've got it under control!" Anakin yelled over his shoulder.

A second lap around, and Zekk rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Are you sure?"

"Kind of." Anakin yelled back, the krayt dragon still hot on his heels. It had countless burns and gouges from all the laser fire and explosions Anakin had taken it through, but it didn't show any signs of slowing.

A third lap and Zekk threw up his hands. "Seriously, Anakin!"

"I might need a little help," Anakin panted.

Zekk began jogging alongside him, instantly regretting it as the krayt dragon roared at the addition of a new target. "What do you need me to do?"

"I don't really want to kill it. Just take down one of the walls. I'll try to lead it into the desert." Anakin said.

"Just take down a wall that's at least five meters thick and made of stone and metal?" Zekk repeated blankly, the ground shaking from the heavy footfalls of the massive beast behind them.

"Yeah, or we can keep running in circles and hope it gets tired before we do!" Anakin and Zekk leaped over a fallen turret tower, which was promptly crushed flat by the rampaging beast.
"What if it follows me?"
"Yeah. It won't."
"You sound certain."
"Well, to keep it from trampling any of Vexa's people, I've kind of place a suggestion in its mind that I'm a nice, big, tasty bantha."
Zekk blinked at Anakin, unsure if he heard him correctly. "What?"
"It helps that the krayt dragon is really, really, hungry," Anakin said. "I'm probably the first bantha its seen that can use the Force and run faster than it can, but otherwise, it should stay focused on me."
"Alright," Zekk prepared to jump away. "Try not to get eaten. Otherwise you'll be the biggest disappointment ever for that poor krayt dragon."
"And we can't have that," Anakin chuckled weakly.
)-(VIII)-(
Taryn and Trista sprinted through the large gap in the compound's wall, ignoring the flattened and smoldering buildings around them as they ran in with a tide of Sand People. They were seeking one person in particular, knowing that he had the skills to survive the onslaught unfolding all around the base.
"There!" Trista pointed to their red-head fugitive of a cousin. He was armed with two blaster pistols and was mowing down one Tusken warrior after another.
Trista hefted the bladed polearm that A'Rukven had allowed her to use for the battle, then hurled it into the air like a javelin. Her cousin somehow managed to see the projectile at the last second and angled his body so that it sailed past him.
He brought his blasters up again, but this time Taryn's gaffi-stick smashed down on the barrels and sent the guns clattering uselessly into the sand. Both sisters pulled out dual fighting knives and began to circle their cousin.
"Well, well, if it isn't the Zel twins." The Hapan fugitive chuckled, dropping into a combat stance. "I should be insulted that that Jedi bitch on the throne sent only the two of you after me."
"You should be flattered," Trista corrected. "She was initially only going to send Aleson after you. She didn't think you were worth our time."
"When I send the two of you back to Hapes in pieces, she'll know better." He flicked his wrists and metal batons shot out into his hands. Razor thin blades sprung out of the ends so that the batons resembled

small, double-bladed axes. In a whirlwind attack, he spun towards Taryn, expecting to catch her off guard.
The younger Hapan was expecting it, however, and slinked out of the way. "Give it up, cousin. If you come back peacefully, the Queen Mother *might* show you some mercy."
"I'll never bow to that half-blooded Jedi whor…"
While Taryn had kept their cousin's attention, Trista had circled around. In a daring move, she leaped out from his blind spot with blades flashing. The fugitive turned to face her, only to see Taryn sprint at him out of the corner of his eyes. He lashed out with both batons, but the twins were much more agile than he was; their slender bodies more capable than his bulky frame. In a single move, both sisters severed the tendons in their cousin's wrists with surgical precision. His batons fell to the sand as his hands became useless. He was far from harmless, however.
Enraged he lashed out with his durasteel-toed boot. One particularly brutal kick connected with Taryn's head and the twelve-year old dropped lifelessly to the ground; blood trickling from her ears and nose and into the sand.
Trista stared in horror at her sister's limp form, before her grey eyes became flinty and emotionless. "You'll regret that. Assault on any member of the royal family is punishable by death."
"Oh?" Their cousin smirked. "With just you, how do you expect to win? I'm twice your age and have already attended the elite corps training program. I've killed dozens, had people *beg* me to kill them. I would have even made Dukat if that Jedi whore hadn't taken the throne. Just what can *you* do, little girl?"
Trista didn't make any reply. Instead, she hurled both her knives at him. Again he dodged, running towards her with the intent to tackle her. Emerging from Trista's sleeve, however, was her holdout blaster. Just before her cousin reached her, she fired three shots in ascending fashion. Pale green bolts hit the Hapan fugitive in the chest, throat, and right between his shock-filled eyes.
"You don't need much training or a résumé to fire a blaster, cousin," Trista said coldly, as the older Hapan collapsed to the ground. She then hastily discarded her blaster and slid to her sister's side. "Taryn!"
)-(IX)-(
The base was in complete ruins, with every building, ship, and turret tower, a smoldering wreck. Bodies and broken droids littered the ground, already being reclaimed by the shifting sands of the desert.

Gorga the Hutt and a handful of survivors were being watched vigilantly by Anakin, Jaina, Tahiri, and Jag, as the Sand People were more inclined to execute them for their crimes.
"You can't do this!" Gorga blustered. "I am a member of the Grand Council! You will all regret the day you crossed me. You…" He trailed off as several sail-barges appeared on the horizon.
"What do you think the Grand Council will do when they discover the deal you made with the Yuuzhan Vong?" Anakin said mildly.
Jaina played a recording she got off the base security system, one with Gorga eagerly anticipating being granted sole sovereignty over Nal Hutta.
That seemed to quiet the Hutt. "You…you can't play that. You don't know what they others will do to me!" Gorga squeaked out. "Wait! I'll make you a deal! I'll tell you all about my transactions with the Vong if you tell the council that this was all just a big misunderstanding. Please, you Jedi are supposed to be merciful, right?"
"If the information is worth it, we might consider it," Anakin said.
"I have maps! Troop deployments and locations of their garrisons and fleets!" Gorga blurted. "I even know how many ships they have!"
"Really?" Tahiri said skeptically. "They just told you this?"
"Remember, lying to a Jedi is bad," Jaina added.
"Well they didn't exactly tell me," Gorga's large eyes darted back and forth between the Jedi. "But when I was making my deal with them, I bribed one of the Peace Brigade members there to give me the information. I then used the Hutt Underground to confirm it all. It was dangerous, but I paid them well. Credits really do make a lot of problems go away, huh."
The Jedi teens resisted the urge to commit bodily harm on the slimy Hutt. "And this data would be where?"
"I have it with me. It was going to be my leverage if they tried to cross me." To the disgust of everyone, the Hutt reached into one of the many folds of his body and produced a slime-covered datapad. "Here, you can have it."
Jaina floated the pad over to herself and kept it hovering in the air, having no desire to actually touch it. She glanced through the first few files, and nodded slowly. "It looks like Gorga's telling the truth."
"There's no way we can let him live, though," Tahiri protested. "Not after his thugs killed members of Vexa's tribe."
"Hey now, pretty girl," Gorga groveled. "I surrendered! I'm your prisoner. Jedi don't kill their prisoners. Right?"
Tahiri shuddered and brandished her lightsaber. "Call me 'pretty girl' again and it'll be justifiable Hutticide."

The sail-barges were getting closer.
"Anakin," Jaina floated the datapad over to him. "What do you think?"
Anakin glanced pensively at the Hutt, then back to the sail-barges. "Gorga. Were you scheduled to meet the Yuuzhan Vong any time soon?"
"In a couple of days, to finalize our deal," the Hutt nodded. "But they'll have no doubt learned that my base was ruined. I'm about as useless to them as my stupid security system was to me."
"You'll go to the meeting anyways," Anakin said. "But this time you'll let the Vong commander know that Anakin Solo and Jaina Solo are on Tatooine. This will definitely ensure that he's on the first ship out here. You do that and return, and we won't tell the rest of your council what you were doing behind their backs. Instead, we'll tell them that you were instrumental in helping them reclaim their ancestral planet."
Gorga's eyes went through a variety of expressions as horror battled with greed and pride. Finally, though, the Hutt slumped and nodded. "I'll do it."
"Good," Anakin said, and he walked away from the Hutt.
Both Tahiri and Jaina joined him. "You know the Yuuzhan Vong commander won't let him live."
Anakin glanced briefly at his sister and nodded. "Yeah, I know."
"You're literally sending him to his death," Tahiri said, sounding surprised. "Not that he doesn't deserve it. But still…"
"His days are numbered anyways," Anakin said softly. "We might as well get the most out of it while Gorga's feeling cooperative."
"If you're sure it's the right thing to do," Jaina said hesitantly.
Anakin looked back at Gorga for several long seconds, then nodded again. "I'm sure. You said it earlier. If we can get the Yuuzhan Vong commander out here and out of his home turf, we have a better chance of winning. Besides, look at the datapad again. Look where the commander is keeping much of his local defense forces."
Jaina and Tahiri peered at the datapad, and their eyebrows rose. "Ylesia!"
Anakin allowed a grim smile. "Once we take out the main fleet, with help from our friends on Ylesia, the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong forces in Hutt Space shouldn't be a problem."
)-(X)-(
"Will she be alright?" Trista whispered hoarsely, looking lost as she clasped her twin sister's hands tightly in her own.
Zekk had an unconscious Taryn's head resting in his lap, a hand on her forehead, his eyes closed. More to himself than anyone else, he began

murmur the injuries he was sensing. "Fractured skull, two places. Definitely a concussion, and swelling of the brain. Internal bleeding..." Though he was speaking quietly, Trista's sharp ears picked up on his self-report and her expression looked stricken as her eyes filled with tears. Through her schooling, she was well aware that even with a bacta tank, the chances of surviving such trauma to the brain were very low. "You can save her though, right? You're a Jedi. You can save her! You have to save her..." Trista trailed off, looking on the pale face of her sister. "Please."

Zekk wet his lips and nodded. "It would be better if we had Tekli or one of the other healers here, but I'll do what I can."

Zekk focused on the Taryn's presence, her flickering life force. Despite the injuries she had sustained, the young Hapan girl was still fighting, still struggling to stay alive. That only made him all the more determined to save her. Still linked to the other Jedi, the healing lessons Tekli had given to Jaina before the Myrkr mission filtered into his mind and he used them to its fullest extent. He concentrated on the blood vessels that had been ruptured from the traumatic blow and willed them back together to stem the bleeding. He also redirected the blood and fluids that had spilled out into Taryn's skull out of her body. The blood leaving her nose intensified as a result.

Trista emitted a strangled sound at seeing this, and kept her tear-streaked face focused pleadingly on her twin.

Zekk clenched his jaw and was grateful when he felt the Force presences of the other Jedi reach out to comfort the distraught Hapan girl and to reinforce his own abilities.

He swallowed apprehensively. His next job was to soothe the swelling of Taryn's brain. It was already pushing up against the skull fragments created by the kick, as well as other parts of the skull, creating a dangerous pressure. Again, he called on the Force and infused the young girl on the ground in front of him with as much of it as was safe. He used the Force to abate the trauma the brain had suffered by accelerating the girl's natural healing many, many times over.

Like a puzzle, Zekk then went about repositioning the shattered elements of Taryn's skull. He continued to accelerate her healing so that weak bonds formed between her skull and the fragmented pieces. Taryn would definitely need a medical professional's help, even a bacta tank, but this make-shift effort would help her last until then.

The combination of the two techniques paid off, and gradually, Zekk felt her thread-like pulse grow stronger.

Trista, who was gripping her sister's hand, whimpered softly as she too felt the change, her grey eyes sparkling with tears of relief and gratitude.
Zekk sat back and let out a shaky breath, final realizing how exhausted he was. He tore off a piece of his robe and wetted it with water from his canteen, and with the utmost care, he gently cleaned away the blood and grime that had covered Taryn's face.
As if responding to his touch, her eyes weakly fluttered open.
"Taryn," Trista breathed, closing her eyes for a moment in silent prayer of thanks as she tightened her grip on her sister's hands.
"Trista?" Taryn said faintly, seeing the vast blue sky above her. "What? Why am I on the ground?"
"Our least favorite cousin kicked your head in," Trista scolded, as if it was entirely Taryn's fault. "You're lucky we keep a Jedi around, or you'd be …well, a lot worse off than you are now."
"Zekk," Taryn blinked, she tilted her head to the side to look up at the Jedi.
"Hey," Zekk said, nothing but concern in his green eyes. "How're you feeling?"
Taryn blinked very slowly as she assessed herself. "I have a very bad headache. And I'm really, really hungry for some reason."
"I sped up your body's metabolism to help with the healing. You still need a bacta dip though. It wouldn't hurt to have an actual healer look you over either. It's like all the things in your head are being held together by threads. If Tekli or Master Cilghal had been here, they probably could have fixed you up without those added troubles." Zekk forced himself to smile. "But, you had to settle for me."
Taryn weakly slugged his arm. Then, when she didn't achieve the desired resulted, glanced over to her sister. "Trista, hit him for me."
"Ouch!" Zekk flinched. The Hapan girl could hit hard.
"We didn't settle for anyone," Trista's glare was softened by the way she unexpectedly wrapped her arms around Zekk in a tight hug, her smaller form trembling with relief. "No one else saved Taryn's life but you. So you can drop the humble-Jedi stuff."
"Couldn't have said it better myself," Taryn managed with an affirming nod. "Guess I owe you one, Jedi Zekk."
"How about not getting kicked in the head anytime soon?" Zekk said, rubbing Trista's back reassuringly. "This event alone might have given me a few white hairs."
"A few is fine," Taryn said nonchalantly, sounding healthy for someone who had their skull kicked in. "It'll just make you look more distinguished."

Trista groaned against Zekk shoulder and shook her head. "Now you've done it. She won't ever stop talking about you." She pushed away and knelt by her sister again. "In a few moments I'll let dad know where we are and we're heading back to Hapes first thing."
"But…"
"Taryn," Trista glared.
Taryn pouted and looked hesitantly at Zekk. She seemed to debate something with herself, before her shoulders slumped. Zekk, who was aware of the girl's thoughts, smiled softly at her desire for him to be there when she woke up again. Instead, however, she had acknowledged that he had a duty to the galaxy and that she had to let him do his 'Jedi business.' "Kick some Vong butt for me, Zekk."
"Will do," Zekk's smile was genuine as he gazed down at the Hapan girl fondly. "And you get better soon. It was nice working with you again, Zel."
"Yeah," Taryn's eyes fluttered close as Zekk gently induced a healing coma in the girl. "We make a good team, don't we?"
"That we do, Taryn," Zekk said, brushing her hair as she drifted off to sleep.
"Taryn?" Trista looked up to Zekk in barely concealed panic.
"She'll be alright. I'm just making sure she stays that way," Zekk said, inclining his head towards Trista. The red-headed girl exhaled once more, and the 'I'm-a-kick-ass-Hapan-warrior-girl' face once again slid into place.
"The Zel family owes you a great debt, Jedi Zekk," Trista said formally. "If you ever have need of us, as long as it does not go against the Queen Mother's wishes, you have but to call on us."
Zekk rolled his eyes and fondly mussed Trista's hair too. "You don't have to be the formal warrior-girl all the time."
Trista's pout was a mirror of her sister's as she motioned to Taryn. "One of us has to be the serious one. Otherwise people can't tell us apart."
Zekk chuckled. "Alright. I hope you and your sister make it back to Hapes safely."
Trista hesitated. Glancing down at her sister's sleeping form, then back at him, she nodded in decision. "This is from Taryn. Since she's not in any condition to properly thank you, it is up to me to maintain our family's honor."
The Hapan girl gave Zekk a very quick, chaste, but sincere kiss on his cheek, before pulling away, her expression solemn. As if realizing what she had just done, she flushed slightly and shyly looked away.

"I…I should contact my father. He'll have a ship here to get Taryn to safety," Trista said in a rush, pulling out her comlink and hastily turning away.
Zekk felt the amused reactions from the other Jedi and was only glad that Alema wasn't among them. He'd never hear the end of this if she had been. If the two were only twelve now, he shuddered to think of what they would be like in the future. Though they were like little sisters to him now, going off his friendship from Tenel Ka, he was well aware of how fast Hapan women matured. One thing was clear, though. The two had somehow wormed their way past his defenses and he was never going to stop worrying about them.
)-(XI)-(
Gorga the Hutt had hastily explained to the rest of the council that he had been working with the Jedi all along to lure the Yuuzhan Vong into a brilliant trap of his design. It was doubtful the rest of the council brought it, but they were more than happy to help Gorga onto the next ship to Nal Hutta to continue his 'brilliant' plan. The surviving criminals within Gorga's camp had surrendered to the Jedi to avoid being executed by the Sand People. After the Jedi had ascertained what their crimes were, those with legitimate bounties on their heads were immediately turned over to the Hutt Grand Council, while the others were picked up by the *Trickster* and dropped off at the nearest Galactic Alliance prison. The battle had been won, but it had been costly, especially for several of the smaller tribes who had come to help. Nearly seventy Sand People had died in the battle, not to mention every single member of the tribes allied to Gorga. Though the Jedi had managed to convince Vexa to spare the children and mothers of the three tribes, the men had not been as fortunate. A mass funeral ceremony was held in the remains of Gorga's base for the allied warriors, while the corpses of the three tribes were simply shoved into the remains of the sarlaac pit and buried with sand.
A large bonfire crackled, the smoke spiraling out into the night's sky as the bodies were immolated, their souls joining those of their ancestors. The allied tribes had all joined in from the solemn ceremony, with speakers for the dead regaling the ancestors with the deeds accomplished by those who had passed on.
The Jedi, Jag, and Shaeri all watched from a distance. A rhythmic drum beat joined the chants and stories, while several Sand People appeared to re-enact the fights of some of the more prominent of the deceased. And then as one, the gathered tribes let out a guttural cry to the sky that reverberated across the empty desert.

"You always hear stories about the Sand People," Zekk said softly. "That they're inhuman animals. Murderous bandits. But if people saw this..."
"It is like the Yuuzhan Vong," Shaeri said softly, glancing at Zekk. "Much of this galaxy sees my people as butchers and crazed fanatics. But you and the others have given us a chance. Have made the effort to at least try and understand us. Perhaps what this desert needs is someone to do something similar."
"The mistrust on both sides has gone on for too long," Tahiri said with a sad shake of her head. "It has become the culture of both the settlers and the Sand People. At best, there can only be an uneasy truce between the two sides. So long as the settlers don't venture far out into the desert, the Sand People will leave them alone. If anything, it is the settlers who are like the Yuuzhan Vong. They invade this territory, displace the Sand People from their homes, and slaughter them because they do not understand the Sand Peoples' way of life. This has always been the way for centuries."
"That is sad," Shaeri said, her gaze transfixed on the funeral pyre. "The Sand People are a noble race with such a rich culture. They live symbiotically with the desert and simply wish to be left alone."
"We'll put it on the things we need to improve after the war," Anakin said.
"Leave it to my little brother to not back down from an impossible challenge," Jaina sighed, a half-smile on her lips.
Anakin shrugged. "Who knows, maybe one of these days, the Sand People and the settlers can live side-by-side, just like the Yuuzhan Vong and Jedi."
)-(Chapter End)-(
A\N: Next chapter next week...even more action as it'll focus mostly on Bakura this time. Then two chapters from now will conclude both Bakura and Tatooine arcs, and then we'll have what is possibly the longest interlude chapter in the story. Thanks again to all who take the time to review, and everyone else who gives me their silent support by continuing to read this insanely long saga that's practically been a year and a half in the making. I really shudder to think how long the sequel will take me considering I've quasi-planned it to be a lot longer than I thought it was going to be (had to squish storylines and squeeze in the rest of the post-NJO EU into three giant story arcs!).
Deleted Scenes:
So, there'll be two medium-length scenes this week, alternate version of events that took place over the past three chapters. They're more or less the initial direction I was taking Alema's character arc and the

Bakuran arc before I changed my mind. More explanations at the end of each scene.

Snip**Snip

Jedi Master Tresina Lobi paced back and forth in one of the back streets of Mon Cal, glancing at the time every so often. It was very late at night and she normally wouldn't be out save for a request she had received. Glancing for her contact, she kept her Force senses stretched outwards, searching. At the same time, she used the Force to make those around her forget that they had seen her, her presence an inconsequential thing.

"Master Lobi." Tresina jerked in surprise. For all her vigilance, she hadn't picked up the speaker's approach.

"Jedi Knight Rar." The Twi'lek emerged from one of the darkened alleyways off to the side. The blue Twi'lek's intricate tattoos around her lekku looked all the more menacing in the faint street light dangling above them. The form-fitting black leather pants and shirt the younger Jedi wore only added to the air of danger she projected. An air Tresina had failed to feel until the other Jedi was mere meters away. "Is there a reason why we had to meet here at this time?"

"I have a little problem with this odd bird popping up wherever I am. Since her plaything's went to Hapes instead of returning here, she hasn't anyone else to bug. She's also why I contacted you."

"You speak of Vergere."

"I think she's a danger to the Order," Alema nodded. "In my conversations with her, it is clear that she does not think much of it. She has done nothing overt, but her questions and demeanor are… different, than a Jedi's."

"She is from the Old Repubic. It is doubtless her ways and the customs she is used to would be different from our own."

"It's more than that, Master Lobi." Alema said with a shake of her head. "Verere is not what she seems. If action isn't take it, I can promise that many people will regret it."

"Then do you have any evidence of this?" Tresina asked evenly. "Ayddar, Master Skywalker, and many others have already questioned her for hours on end. They saw nothing that would alarm them."

"That's because Vergere only allowed them to see what they expected to see," Alema said, frustration in her voice. "Look, according to Jacen, Vergere went to Zonama Sekot back long ago to look into its organic fighters for the Republic. There she met the Vong and decided to go with them to stop them from invading the galaxy. There's several things I find fishy about that story. One, Vergere supposedly did this to protect the galaxy and the people in it. Yet she did not seem so

surprised to learn that the entire Jedi Order she knew had been killed. Nor did she seem torn up about it. I don't know about you, but if I left the galaxy and came back to find everyone I knew dead or gone, I'd probably go mad. The second thing is that Vergere continues to hide and shield herself from all of you. You may be suspicious about her, but she hasn't done anything to outright disrupt anything. If she's supposed to be a Jedi of old, shouldn't she be working with Master Skywalker and the others to help restore the Order?"
"You bring up good points, Alema. But again, it is just conjecture. We do not know much about how the Jedi of old operated. Perhaps Vergere was among the Jedi operating at the fringes of the galaxy. If that was so, she would not have strong ties to the core. As for her shielding herself from the others, perhaps that is her way of grieving. She does not want to disrupt the others by sharing her grief so she keeps it within herself. Her view of the universe and of the Force is unique and invaluable to the Order. As you said, until she actually does something that can constitute a threat, I do not see what I can do."
Alema clenched her jaw. "Look, Master Lobi. I came to you because you are the most subtle of the Jedi on the council. You can move and not draw attention to yourself. Just humor me. Observe Vergere when you can, her words as well as what the presence she gives off in the Force. If you truly can't find anything, fine. At least I tried. But if you do find something, well, all the better for the Order then."
Tresina nodded reluctantly. "Very well, Jedi Rar. I shall do as you requested. If, by the end of the month, I cannot find anything."
"Then I'm probably going crazy," Alema said with a twisted smile. "Thanks for taking the time, Master."
Alema faded back into the shadows of the alleyway and once again disappeared from Tresina's perceptions. A mix of apprehension and uncertainty filled the Jedi Master, but it was quickly attributed to the late hour and the darkness of the street. Shrugging, Tresina pushed her hands into her pockets and left the backstreet. It appeared that she would be busy for the next couple of weeks.
Snip**Snip
Would have taken the place of the bar-fight and Corran bailing-her-out scenes. My initial plan for the Alema character arc was not for her to get better, but for her to be slowly driven mad and away from her friends by everyone's favorite Fosh. It would have been a battle of the wills and cunning between Alema and Vergere, with Master Tresina Lobi unfortunately meeting an earlier than canon death when she gets caught between the two, and Alema being forced to flee the Order when framed for that death. Since the plot involved scheming Sith far

earlier than I wanted them to scheme, and detracted from the main YV War plots, I ultimately scrapped (most of) the idea in favor for the more happier turn her life has taken. That's not to say you won't see remnants of this plot later on...=)
Second scene takes place on Bakura just after Doran and Sannah take off to chase Malinza and the others at the out of control rally.
***Snip**Snip**
"I'll keep following these five. You take care of the others." Doran managed.
Sannah nodded, and with a single leap, sprung back towards the square they had come from. Another leap, and she landed in front of a line of peace officers, all of whom were firing indiscriminately into the crowd. Among these officers was the commander of the security forces present in the square. With a single motion, she sent their guns flying out of their hands. They looked at her, completely nonplussed.
"Order your men to stop firing," Sannah snapped, as connected as she was to the currents of life on the planet, she could feel the individual lives being snuffed out behind her and didn't have time to waste.
"You have no authority…"
"Order them to stop firing!" Sannah pressed, this time using the Force in her voice.
The commander nodded. "All units, cease fire! Cease fire!"
After the several seconds of ear-shattering blaster fire, the silence was just as deafening. The smell of smoke and burnt flesh filled the air.
"You had no right to interfere," the commander blustered. "We were handling an armed insurrection against the government."
"No one you killed was armed," Sannah said. Her eyes flickered to the speeder behind the commander and saw crates of blaster rifles loaded in back. They were older models, and in various conditions, but there was no reason the security forces should be lugging around crates of old blasters. Sannah inhaled sharply and her eyes flickered back to the commander in alarm. "Yet."
"You shouldn't have gotten involved, little girl." The commander shook his head.
Before Sannah could say another word, several stun bolts hit her. Just before she lost consciousness, she heard the commander order his men to resume firing.
)( )(
Doran staggered when he felt Sannah lose consciousness, tripping and slamming into several metal bins. The resulting collision sent the bins crashing to the floor and alerted the ones he was following to his presence.

"We were followed!" A voice said in alarm.
"We're still a way aways from the Stack."
Doran heard blasters being primed.
"No guns,Vyram."
"He could be one of the Prime Minister's lackies."
"It's worse," a voice said from behind Doran. "He has a lightsaber."
Doran glanced over his shoulder and saw a Rodian emerge from the shadows.
"Salkeli, you made it!"
"Sorry, Malinza. I got held up," The Rodian shrugged apologetically. He then jabbed a finger at Doran. "That person's a Jedi."
"Jedi filth!" A brown-haired teen said angrily. "Are you working for our government?"
"No," Doran held out his hands to his side disarmingly. "I only came here to learn what's happening. After meeting with your planet's leaders, the ones I was with agreed that something on this planet isn't right."
"What isn't right is that *your* government continues to drain Bakura of our resources long after our debt to them has been paid." The one the others called 'Malinza' said. "After all this time, you truly expect us to believe that you're here for something other than to further your own government's hold over us?"
Doran glanced back in Sannah's direction. "Look, I don't have anything against you, but something just happened to my friend."
"Your friend?"
"She went back to stop the security forces from firing on the crowd."
"That's a waste," The brown-haired teen said. "They'll just kill her too."
"No, she's still alive, I can feel it." Doran said.
"Then there's only one other place they'd take her," Malinza shrugged. "The Salis D'aar Penitentiary. Cundertol sends all of the political prisoners there. Good luck getting her out though."
"You won't help?"
"Why should we?"
"You help the Jedi, the Jedi help you," Doran replied. He had read about the religion of Bakura on the way over and was grateful for it. "I heard you mention the Balance earlier. Sannah went back to stop the security forces from killing the others. Maybe some got away, I heard the gunfire stop. In turn, she gets captured. The Balance is still kept."
"And helping you would create unbalance," Malinza pointed out.
"In your favor," Doran countered. "I'll have to return the favor to you to cancel out my debt to you. I can't do this on my own and having a Jedi owe you can come in handy."

"Or bring ruin down upon us," the brown-haired boy said.
"Shhh…Zel," Malinza snapped. "You want us to help you, you have to do something for us first. *We* keep our word. You Jedi, not so much."
"What do you want?"
"A public statement denouncing Cundertol and admitting that your government was wrong to continue to use Bakura's resources and give nothing in return."
"What?"
"They're only words, Jedi," a blonde-haired, pony-tailed girl said. "Speak them and we'll help you break your friend out of prison."
Not knowing how Sannah was, or even knowing if he had the time to go back to his mother to try and free her, Doran swallowed and nodded. "Fine. Can we make the broadcast as we travel to the prison though?"
"Fair enough," Malinza agreed. "We need to remove Cundertol and his lackies from power before they affirm any treaty with the P'w'eck, so the sooner the better."
"How long do we have? I mean, the only thing I know is that the negotiations were still in their initial stages."
"But they will go through if Cundertol is left in power," Malinza said. They began walking. "According to our source in the government, we can expect a full treaty in three to four months."
"Source?"
"Look, just because we're working together doesn't mean we'll give up all our secrets. You help us, we help you. That's the end of it. We dislike what your government has done to Bakura and are only happy that our own government is stupid enough to anger the Jedi."
Snip**Snip
So…the second scene might look very familiar to everyone who didn't skim through the Bakuran arc section of this story. Sannah was initially going to be the one captured, but then I read the scene over and it looked like one of those stereotypical 'damsel in distress' type arcs. Not that I'm against Doran being the knight in shining armor, but it kind of painted me into a corner and wasn't how I wanted to portray Sannah as a character. So, yup, even in the planning stage of the story Doran takes the fall for his girlfriend. Isn't he a great guy =D.
Snip*Snip
As always, reviews are appreciated if you have the time to leave one.
Anon review response:
JediMasterDraco- 1. yes 7. The Force does help him read thoughts and emotions (kind of cheating during negotiations, aggressive or otherwise) 9. Enjoy the Krayt Dragon this chapter? 23.

Hmmm...Abeloth on tour...how much are the tickets to her concert? 27. I was thinking 'how am I going to get everyone to Tatooine' when writing that scene. 28. Give me two male deer, you lost the bet...mmmm venison. 29. I added a couple of Sith Witches and a ship with obscure references to the remaining person on your list, to the gathering at Gorga's base after reading your review...you know, just for fun. 30-38. It was my intention to make this arc an older version of the YJK adventures. 39-43. Glad you enjoyed the scene, you hopeless romantic. 47. Thanks for a very long review!

ADA 35

Thirty-Five
)-(I)-(

When the token show of support, a nine capital ship strike-group, sent by Cal Omas finally arrived in orbit around Tatooine, they were surprised to learn that they were the last in a long line of already present allied fleets. A small contingent of Hapan ships had arrived hours earlier. While a fairly large scattering of other vessels, military and civilian, mingled about as well.

The news of Anakin's daring plan had reached the Insiders—a group of old-timers who had come together on Borleias to counteract the pitfalls a burgeoning bureaucracy created for the military force—and they in turn tapped their own resources to help out.

Wedge donated two top-of-the-line Star Destroyers, an Interdictor, and a Nebulon-B cruiser from his fleet, with complete compliments of starfighters, and a thank you to Anakin and Tahiri. Officially, the captains of the vessels, as well as the entire crews, had been granted leave as a reward for their stalwart defenses of Kuat. Unofficially, Wedge had things more than under control in his sector. The Yuuzhan Vong under Wedge's command had proven themselves several times over and were playing vital roles in his defense of the shipyards. Now a commander of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong under Antilles, one of the initial Freed Ones, Czalpak, had become one of Wedge's most trusted advisors. Czalpak and the other Freed Ones had infuriated the Yuuzhan Vong commander tasked with taking Kuat by boarding and stealing the enemy Yuuzhan Vong ships right out from under him. These additions had augmented Wedge's fleet and kept the enemy commander from thinking clearly. So much so that it was evident that Wedge felt safe enough to send these ships during a lull in the fighting.

Also in attendance was a small flotilla of supply ships from the Smuggler's Alliance, provided by Talon Karrde and Lando. These were filled to the brim with ordinance, fuel, YVH-1 battle droids, and everything a full fleet would need to sustain an all-out war. They had learned of Anakin's plan through the Insider's network and wanted in on it for more than one reason. Like Tenel Ka had realized, the Smuggler's Alliance saw the economic and political potential of getting on the good side of the Hutts, who were notorious for taxing and regulating the trade within their space. Talon Karrde had personally arrived with this fleet to handle his own set of negotiations.

And there were still more ships standing by. Though not part of the Insiders, even the Bothans had joined in thanks to Admiral Kre'fey's recommendation. Using his own connections, Admiral Kre'fey convinced his government to help. Though he was restricted from personally sending ships, since it would have needed approval from the Senate, the Bothan government itself had no such restrictions. Not only was clearing out Hutt Space tactically advantageous—doing so would better secure the space around Kashyyyk—but annihilating an entire Yuuzhan Vong battle group would most definitely hurt the Yuuzhan Vong and make the Galactic Alliance stronger. The Bothans were all the more eager to help, since their assistance would further their 'ar'krai,' or war-of-annihilation, against the Yuuzhan Vong. As such, they had provided an eyebrow raising battle fleet of five fully-equipped Bothan Assault Cruisers and four frigates, making them the second largest group outside of the Galactic Alliance forces sent by Cal Omas.

Perhaps the most surprising of the reinforcements, however, was the *Alderaan's Fury,* one of the latest generation of Mon Cal cruisers, with its escort of three *Republic*-class cruisers and compliment of X-wings, B-wings and Twi'lek *Chir'daki*-class fighters. All were from the fleet of General Garm Bel Iblis, the elder statesman, tactician, and leader. He had apparently been contacted by Han and Leia and the two had somehow convinced him to lend a couple ships of his own to Anakin's cause. It was a task that had actually been simpler than it appeared, since Garm Bel Iblis' base of operations was already in the Ryloth system—practically next door to Tatooine—ensuring that the Yuuzhan Vong didn't try advance out of Hutt Space.

Last but not least, the Hapans had brought a sizable force of their own. Though she had originally planned to bring along only herself and Jacen, Tenel Ka hadn't exactly managed to get away in just her *Rock Dragon.* Even if it was common for fathers to give their daughter some type of communication device, or weapon, for emergencies whenever

they left the house, Isolder was not like most fathers. Before Tenel Ka had left, he had insisted that she take a small fleet, and sufficient supplies for a lengthy campaign, with her. So instead of a single frigate, she now had a small fleet of two Battle Dragons, four battle cruisers, a couple of support ships, and a full wing of fighters. Just in case. She was the Queen Mother after all.

Each group of ships wouldn't have lasted long on their own against a full Yuuzhan Vong battle group. Together, however, they stood more than a fair chance at victory. Especially with the devious minds and Jedi in their midst.

"How does he do it?" Corran threw up his hands in disbelief as he stared at the rather large assembly of ships outside the viewport of the shuttle he was in.

"He's Anakin," Alema shrugged, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "I stopped trying to figure it out long ago. It's less painful if you just go with the flow."

"That's a good idea," Jacen's holographic form agreed. He too appeared to be staring at the fleet from his position aboard the *Rock Dragon*. *"I should probably start doing that more often. Someone told me I should loosen up a bit more."*

"Thanks Tenel Ka," Alema called out cheerfully. "Jacen's more fun without a stick up his…"

"Okay," Corran cut her off, directing his gaze to the figure at her side. Alema glanced at Jysella and the two shared the same eye-roll. "Oh, right. My language. Can I swear in Huttese at least?"

Corran sighed in defeat. Something he found himself doing more and more often, coincidentally enough, ever since he took Alema on as his apprentice. He didn't even bother answering his apprentice as he focused on their course. He, Alema, Jysella, and several Galactic Alliance diplomats and officers were on a shuttle bound for the palace that was formerly Jabba the Hutt's. Other shuttles had joined them in formation, along with the *Rock Dragon,* as the respective leaders of each of the small task forces flew down to meet with Anakin and the others.

"This Anakin Solo is truly impressive to have gathered so many disparate allies," the ranking Galactic Alliance officer, a Bothan colonel by the name of Nek Bwua'tu, commented from the co-pilot seat. Technically, he was only present to show the sincerity of the Galactic Alliance's commitment to a treaty with the Hutt Grand Council. If fighting broke out, it would be Corran, the ranking Jedi and member of the High Council, who would command the fleet.

"Impressive is one word I would use to describe him," Corran chuckled. "A couple other words come to mind as well."
"Sexy," Alema provided brightly.
"Handsome," Jysella added, causing Corran to wince and call upon all of his Jedi training and patience. And to think Jysella was still a year away from beginning her teenage years. He was definitely never going to survive it.
"You see, I told you it'd be fun for you to say it, just to see his reaction," Alema continued from behind Corran.
"He is good looking though," Jysella said pressing her index finger to her chin in thought. "And his eyes do that darkening thing every time he starts brooding.
"Alema."
"Yes, Master Horn?" Alema smiled sweetly.
Corran hung his head. "Never mind."
The Bothan colonel glanced back at the Jedi banter with a raised eyebrow, but didn't comment. Corran offered him a faint smile. "As I was saying. Anakin has great potential, if his daring doesn't get him killed first."
The shuttle touched down in the dunes just outside the palace.
As the occupants of the different shuttles disembarked, they were greeted by Anakin, Jaina, and the others.
"Welcome to Tatooine," Tahiri called out cheerfully.
"The Hutt Grand Council has set up the main room for both planning and other diplomatic negotiations. If the diplomats and those who wish to work out any treaties can follow Zekk and Saba, they'll take you to the Hutts responsible," Anakin directed professionally. "All other captains, commanders, Jedi, and poor individuals who got dragged along for the ride, can follow Jaina, Jag, Tahiri, and I so we can update you on the situation and we can make battle plans."
Corran smiled as war veterans thrice as old as Anakin, seasoned captains, diplomats, and senior Jedi all seemed to respond to Anakin's commands and broke off into their respective groups.
Anakin was definitely coming into his own.
The only group who wasn't sending anyone with the diplomats was the Bothans. Their cadre of an admiral and two colonels walked at the back of the rest of the tacticians in silence.
Before Talon Karrde broke off to join the rest of the diplomats, he clapped a terrified Lilmit on the shoulder and appeared to give the former gun-runner authority to act on the Smuggler Alliance's behalf.
Tenel Ka likewise joined the diplomats, bringing with her a small retinue of followers. A single female aide was left to join the

'schemers'—as Corran had mentally labeled Anakin's group—though at first glance the aide didn't seem at all capable of scheming. She stayed at Jacen's side, whether to protect him or to be protected by him, Corran wasn't sure.
Colonel Nek Bwua'tu was the Galactic Alliance's military representative within the 'schemers,' as a whole array of diplomatic corps personnel shuffled off after Zekk and the others. While a female colonel, one Kadra Bres, represented General Garm Bel Iblis' group task force. She was already chatting up Kyp Durron, who had come down on the second shuttle with Valin, Bazel, Seff, and Yaqeel.
To Corran's surprise, the representative of Wedge's group was none other than Wes Janson. Who, to Wes's dismay, had been promoted to the rank of colonel by Wedge. While another member of the Insiders joined the diplomats to create some under-the-table deals with the Hutts, Wes brightly went up to Corran.
"Some party," Wes said exuberantly as he shook Corran's hand in greeting. "Those Solos really know how to throw a bash. I haven't seen a mishmash of this many different units and commanders since…well… come to think of it, ever."
"Good to see you too." Corran grinned. It was hard not to be unhappy around Wes. He just had that bright, joyous attitude no matter what the situation. "If you're with Antilles' group, does that mean the Yellow Aces are also onboard?"
The Yellow Aces, an all-volunteer squadron Wes had led during the Battle of Borleias, had gained quite some fame as an elite squadron since then. Wes nodded mournfully to answer Corran's question. "The bad thing about volunteers: all they have to do is hear that someone is in great need of their help, and they're stumbling head over heels to be the first ones to get there. As their commander, I can't do anything but stumble along after them. At least military pilots wait until their ordered before happily going off to their deaths."
"Hey, Anakin's going to pull us through this," Alema interjected. "Then we can all go happily to the bar and get even happier."
Wes flashed Alema a bright grin and took one of her hands. "I like the way you think. I'm Wes Janson, pilot extraordinaire. Where have you been all my life?"
"Taking care of my grandfather." Alema paused, as if struck by an epiphany. "Say, come to think of it, he's about your age. Maybe you'll know him."
Wes staggered backwards, imitating a mortal wound. While Jysella giggled and cheered Alema on. "Again! You have him on the ropes!"

"Corran, what have you been teaching these kids?" Wes said in mock terror.
"Still haven't got around to the 'respect your elders' lessons. It might be the grey hair, it makes you look older than you act." Corran patted Wes on the back sympathetically. Wes looked betrayed, and Jysella only laughed all the more at the veteran pilot's antics.
At the front of the line, Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin were sharing stories of their own adventures over the past week; from Jacen's excursion with the Queen Mother, to Anakin and Jaina's adventures on Barab I and Tatooine. All the while, the Queen Mother's aide walked almost timidly behind them.
"Oh, by the way, this is Jana," Jacen introduced the aide. "She's actually helped me and Tenel Ka out a lot over the week. She somehow managed to cram as much fun as possible in that brief period of time."
"I did it for the Queen Mother's sake, not yours," Jana said dryly, though her eyes sparkled. "For one not used to the burdens of the crown, it looked as though she needed a break. Though I still do not know why she had me come with you and not one of the military officers."
"We have enough of those already," Jaina said, jerking a thumb over her shoulder. "Military officers, Jedi, Lilmit."
"Thanks a lot," Lilmit muttered, still shrinking away from the variety of famous figures he was walking amongst.
"Tenel Ka probably thought we could use a different point of view," Jacen agreed. "And from your organizational skills, you might be able to help us best use the few ships we have."
"Few ships?" Kyp called out from behind them, temporarily halting his conversation with Colonel Bres. "We have close to three dozen capital ships, five wings of fighters, and enough supplies to keep them all going for at least three months!"
"Which is a good thing," Anakin muttered. "Considering Gorga only knew about the reinforcements Cal Omas was sending."
The turncoat Hutt had departed from Nal Hutta three days ago and had yet to return or send word of any kind. Anakin knew that Gorga would betray the number of ships in the Galactic Alliance fleet, had been counting on it in fact. The Yuuzhan Vong commander was going to be in for one unpleasant surprise when he found over twice the number of ships he expected waiting for him.
The 'schemers' were brought to a room that had once housed Jabba's torture operations for droids gone bad. It had been completely cleared and refurbished with chairs, a long table, and several holographic

projectors. The walls had also been cleared of grime so that they gleaned a sandy-white glow in the light from the fixtures that had been installed in the ceiling.
Already in the room was Hutt Grand Council representative Vedo Anjiliac Atirue, reclining on a hover platform with a translator droid next to him.
"Vedo," Anakin bowed his head politely. "Thank you for hosting us."
The Hutt murmured approvingly and motioned to the others. The translator droid quickly provided a response. "The great Vedo the Hutt welcomes you all and looks forward to the defeat of the Yuuzhan Vong at Nal Hutta. He says that he will provide whatever assistance you need and will help coordinate your forces with that of the Hutt Underground. Until then, the illustrious Vedo will simply sit back and listen to your plans."
"Great, thank you," Anakin smiled at the Hutt. He then motioned towards the chairs and everyone took a seat. "First of all, thank you all for coming out here. It's a lot more help than I expected, but we'll definitely need all of you for this to succeed. Gorga the Hutt has gone to Nal Hutta under the pretense of betraying the Jedi, namely me and Jaina, to the commander of Yuuzhan Vong forces in Hutt Space, a Shith'rii Choka, relative to the new Warmaster. We expect him to come out here personally for the honor of capturing Jaina and I."
"So you intend to fight a battle over Tatooine?" Corran asked.
"Better here than in Hutt Space," Anakin nodded. "Also, if we draw the Yuuzhan Vong fleet out of Hutt Space, this allows for the Underground as well as Taan's people on Ylesia more freedom to act."
"You have already thought this battle out, haven't you?" Colonel Kadra Bres of the Bel Iblis taskforce commented with a whistle. "The general told me you Solos were impressive."
"Jaina, Jag, Zekk, and Tahiri have helped me refine the plan somewhat. My basic goal is to take out as much of Shith'rii's fleet here as possible and then chase the survivors all the way back to Nal Hutta. Anyone he leaves behind to hold the fort will have trouble from the Hutt Underground and Freed Yuuzhan Vong. Before the month is out, I want to give the Hutts their planet back."
"Ambitious." The admiral for the Bothan forces clapped his hands in approval. "I must admit I was dubious when Kre'fey informed me of the prowess of the Jedi, but I am convinced now. My forces are most definitely at your disposal, Jedi Knight Solo."
"Thank you," Anakin said respectfully. "I promise to do my best to keep your people alive, admiral."

"Well then," Wes rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Let's get started. Remember people, Anakin, his brother and sister, and their friends, are technically still on leave. Let's finish this so that they can enjoy the rest of it *without* the worry of death."

)-(II)-(

Alema stared out across the desert, sitting on an outcropping outside of Jabba's Palace. There was something calming about watching the twin suns of Tatooine slowly sink below the horizon. Without any city lights or sky full of congested traffic, the array of stars that appeared in the retreating glow of the suns was truly breath taking. The arid, warm climate of the planet, and the rocky cliffs all around her, reminded her of her faint, yet happy memories of her and Numa's time on Ryloth. Before everything went all wrong.

"Wish you were here, Numa," Alema said whimsically to the orange and purple sky. "It's never seemed right, you know; going on without you. It used to be just us, sisters, partners, apprentices. We were dancers, pleasure girls, Jedi, anything we had to be to survive. We went to the darkest pits this galaxy had to offer, but we always had each other. Always watched each other's backs."

Alema sniffled and her lekku twitched sympathetically to her distress. "I'm so lost, Numa. Master Horn says that I need to find my own way. But I don't know where to begin. Have no idea what to do with myself now. Where do I go from here? What do I do? I don't even hate the Vong anymore, so I can't go off killing them all. I can't even be angry at you dying."

Silence answered her, but she was okay with that.

At one time, that silence might have been painful, a dismal emptiness once filled by Numa's teasing responses. But now, now things were different. It hurt, but it didn't. Alema was both happy, but also said. The myriad of emotions still confused her. One thing was clear though; the anger, the hate, and the despair she had once felt at Numa's death, no longer existed. Any pain she still felt was just a dull echo, replaced by the happier thoughts of their time together.

She exhaled, her green eyes fluttering close as she just randomly reached out through the Force in an attempt to calm herself.

The warm desert breeze that washed over her was comforting in its own way, soothing away her distress as she smiled whimsically.

"I have the greatest friends, though. Anakin and Tahiri," Alema continued softly, opening her eyes to stare up at the darkening sky. "And Jysella's cool too. You definitely would have liked them all. They don't judge like most of the others do. But I don't want you to feel like

I'm replacing you though. It's just…nice, not being completely alone anymore, you know."
Alema reclined fully out across the rocky ground, resting her head in the palms of her hands. "Hey. When the war is over, what do you think we would have done? Would we have stayed good little Jedi, helping to put this galaxy back together?" Alema chuckled at that very idea, she could practically see the incredulous look on her sister's face. "No, you're right. Probably not. Maybe we'd go back to Ryloth and help our people. Though that might get boring after a while, no? Settling down probably isn't in the cards for us. Let's go our own way instead, seeking fortune and adventure. Yeah, I'd like to think we'd do that. Just you and me again, exploring the galaxy, having fun, and freeing other little girls like us. The Rar sisters making the galaxy our playground. That would have been a blast."
Alema's throat closed up as tears ran down her cheeks. "Force I miss you Numa. So, so much. We could have had a whole life full of fun and adventure together, now I have to live it up for the both of us. It's just so hard. A part of me doesn't want to ever move on. But then, the rest of me starts remembering all the good times we had together. All those little things. And then I know that you'd want me to get on with my life."
"Alema?" a voice, soft and timid spoke out.
Alema frantically tried to wipe away her tears. "Oh, hey Sella. I was just having a conversation with my sister."
"I know," Jysella said softly. "She told me to come out here."
Alema froze. "Numa…"
"Well, the Force did," Jysella took a seat next to the Twi'lek. "But since Numa's a part of it, it was most likely her."
Alema emitted a weak chuckle. "Yeah. Definitely. Probably telling me to stop being so weepy and depressing."
"Or she could have been giving you permission to move on," Jysella offered slowly, staring off into the desert. "You said it. You have the rest of your life ahead of you. You've spent the last year grieving. She'll always be with you, in the Force, so you'll still be doing all those fun adventures together."
"I like the way you look at the universe," Alema smiled, closing her eyes. "Don't ever lose that bright outlook, Sella. No matter what happens. It's a heck of a lot happier than what I grew up believing in."
"So are you going to do it?"
"Do what?"
"Live your life," Jysella asked softly, turning her gaze to the Twi'lek next to her. "Instead of living in the shadows of your past."

"When'd you become so wise?" Alema said with an affectionate nudge.
Jysella made a face. "Hello, I have Corran Horn as my dad. I get to hear Jedi wisdom on a daily basis. Fortunately my mom's more fun."
"Yeah." Alema pulled out a tiny holo of her sister from her vest and activated it. She set it down on a pile of nearby rocks and took a moment to just stare at her sister's image. It had been recorded just before New Plympto, showing the Numa Alema had always remembered—happy and full of life. Tears fell silently as the last of the twin suns vanished below the horizon.
"Goodbye, Numa," Alema whispered softly. "Hopefully I won't see you again for a very long time. I have both our lives to live after all."
Alema rose, took one last look at the holo, then turned to Jysella and held out a hand. "Come on. I'm sure the Hutts haven't had any good dancers since this war began. Let's give 'em a show for morale's sake."
"Not sure what that'd do for my dad's morale," Jysella commented with a smile, taking the offered hand. "But I'm all for keeping everyone else happy."
"Great," Alema grinned. "Jabba probably has some of the old dancing outfits stored away. We can make use of those."
"My mom is so going to kill my dad after he kills you," Jysella grinned broadly.
"What's life without a few thrills?"
Together, the two walked hand in hand back to the palace, never once looking back.

)-(III)-(

For Sannah, as far as jailbreaks went, she didn't think she was off to a good start. Then again, this *was* her first time trying to jailbreak someone.
"This isn't good, right?" Sannah called out to Malinza as the klaxon alarms blared loudly throughout the penitentiary. "I thought Salkeli was supposed to cut the alarm system."
"Supposed to!" Malinza yelled back. The two were sprinting through one of the many corridors within the prison. "It looks like something went wrong. Where's your partner?"
Sannah took a moment to concentrate. "We're getting closer. Doran should be in the next cell-block."
Off in the distance, the two heard a volley of blaster fire.
"They knew we were coming," Malinza cursed. "It's the only way they could have detected us so early."
With the help of Sannah's lightsaber, they sliced open a thick door separating the two cell-blocks. In the next room over, however, a dozen security droids immediately raised their blasters and opened

fire. Sannah quickly stretched her arm out to pull Malinza out of the doorway, shortly before the air was filled with a blaze of red.
"Great, now what?" Malinza muttered. Sticking to their code of non-violence, none of the members of the Freedom had brought blasters with them.
Sannah scanned the area and saw a ventilation shaft in the ceiling above the door. "We go up there."
"There?" Malinza glanced upwards. "And just how do you expect us to get up…there."
Sannah had leaped using the Force to assist her and was now clinging to the grate. With a skilled slash of her lightsaber, she removed the covering. Once inside the shaft, she pulled out a cable from her utility belt and dangled it down for Malinza.
"Let's go," Sannah said. This close to Doran, she was more than eager to see that he was safe and firmly berated for making her worry.
The two crawled through the shaft into the other room.
"There's still a matter of all those droids," Malinza whispered loudly.
Sannah closed her eyes and searched each of the droids for the cables that connected their power-cells to their CPUs. When Anakin had been in the academy, she and the other students had learned a lot about how droids worked, and that information was definitely coming in handy. Sannah deftly disconnected the droids from their power sources, and one by one, they all went limp.
Malinza, peering through the grate, sent Sannah a dirty look. "Show off."
Just as they were about to kick out the grate, however, real live security forces entered the cell-block. They held Zel, Jjorg, and Vyram at blaster point. Salkeli was nowhere to be seen. Leading the large force of security guards was the commander of Cundertol's personal forces.
"Malinza!" The commander called out tonelessly. "I know you are here. Come out or I execute your friends one by one."
"You wouldn't dare!" Malinza yelled back.
The commander pulled his blaster and fired a shot before anyone could do anything. Zel pitched forward lifelessly to the ground. "Wouldn't I? Come on out. The Jedi too!"
Malinza looked sharply to Sannah and pressed a finger to her lips, then responded. "She took off the moment she felt your guards enter the other cell block and left me alone!"
"Is that so?" The commander fired another shot, this one hitting Jjorg in her right leg. The blond woman fell to the ground, writhing in pain. "You wouldn't be lying to me, would you?"

Malinza grit her teeth and looked to Sannah again. "I'm counting on you, Jedi Sannah. Don't let me down." She then shouted back out the grate. "I'm not! I'm coming out! Don't hurt them anymore."
Malinza kicked out the grate and slid out. She landed awkwardly on the floor, and the security forces quickly moved in to apprehend her.
"Thank you for cooperating," the command said with false sympathy. "Sadly, I have orders to kill the others. Only you are needed."
"What! But I came out!"
"I promised not to execute your friends one by one," the commander raised a hand, and his guards all trained their blasters on the other members of the Freedom. "So I will execute them all at once instead."
"Who gave you that order?" Malinza said through clenched teeth, green and grey eyes burning with indignant rage. "What gives you the right to *murder* loyal children of Bakura?"
"Since it is doubtful that you will ever see the light of day again," the commander said with a sadistic leer. "I take my orders from Deputy Prime Minister Harris."
"Harris?" Malinza gasped. "But he was helping us!"
"How foolishly naïve you children of Bakura are. This has always been bigger than you thought." The commander turned his back on the members of the Freedom. "Men, take aim!"
Sannah squeezed her eyes shut, her heart pounding with fear and a feeling of helplessness. She had to do something, but in her terror, she couldn't think of what to do next. She couldn't believe she was going to watch the members of Freedom get murdered in cold blood. *Think, Sannah. Think!* She wracked her mind as the seconds went by at a painfully slow crawl.
Just as the commander's mouth began to form the word 'fire,' one of the cell-doors blew out with a powerful gust of wind. The solid metal door mowed down several of the guards and momentarily stunned everyone. Two blaster pistols were summoned from a pair of incapacitated guards and disappeared back into the cell. Another second later, blue stun bolts began to strafe the bewildered guards.
"Doran," Sannah breathed, grinning wildly.
The blond-haired, dwarf-Wookie-sized, sixteen year-old emerged from his cell and continued to fire stun bolts at the rest of the guards. Being in the middle of the cell-block floor, there really was nowhere else for them to take cover. In another couple of seconds, all the guards save the commander were unconscious on the ground.
"And *that's* how a stun bolt feels," the disgruntled young Jedi glowered. He then turned his attention back to the commander, noting Jjorg's

writhing form and Zel's dead one. "You really do have a bad habit of killing unarmed prisoners, don't you?"
"Surrender," the commander said calmly, seemingly not at all fazed by the loss of his squad. "You cannot hope to beat me."
Doran fired stun bolts from both his blasters. The energy washed over the commander, but the man didn't fall to the ground. Doran was gob-smacked. "What?"
The commander began to walk forward, and Doran fired again and again. The bolts didn't seem to do anything.
"What *are* you?" Doran blurted.
The seemingly unstoppable soldier gripped Doran by the collar of his shirt and roughly hurled the tall teen into a nearby cell door. Doran's body literally left an impression in the reinforced metal, and the teen coughed out blood as bones shattered on impact. The commander stalked forward, but a hail of blaster fire peppered his back. The remaining members of Freedom had picked up the blasters of the fallen soldiers and had opened fire. But the blasters, even in their lethal mode, didn't seem to do anything either.
The commander ignored them, drew his own blaster, and began to level the barrel on Doran's crumpled form.
Sannah immediately dropped down from out of the vents, her lightsaber flaring as she severed the man's outstretched arm. With a vicious Force shove, she hoped to send the commander flying. All she did, however, was stagger him back another step. She reached out through the Force to determine who or what he was, and frowned.
"You're a droid?" She blurted incredulously.
The commander began to pick up another blaster from the ground, but this time a shot from Malinza fried the fallen gun before he could reach it. Sannah followed through with a swipe that severed both of the commander's legs. He still began to push himself up on his one remaining arm.
"You'll all regret this," The commander said evenly, finally beginning to twitch as the blaster bolts broke through whatever armored plating he had. "There are things in play that you cannot possibly hope to comprehend."
"Get into Doran's cell!" Sannah yelled out in warning to the members of the Freedom. At the same time, she bodily hauled Doran against her and pulled the both of them into his cell. Sannah quickly went back out and tried to save as many of the unconscious security guards as she could, but there were still too many. Sensing the buildup of energy reach its zenith, she dived back into the jail cell.

Only a moment later, the commander erupted in a brilliant fireball that scorched the walls and charred the doors.
Eyes wide, breathing heavily, the two Jedi and the members of the Freedom exchanged looks of disbelief. Not even the annoying blare of the klaxon sirens in the background, or the heavy stomping of boots as more security forces poured in, shook them from what they had just experienced.
)-(IV)-(
Tyria Sarkin Tainer did her best to hide her anxiety as she traveled with Prime Minister Cundertol, General Panib, and Deputy Prime Minister Harris to the Salis D'aar Penitentiary. The reports that they had received had been confusing and contradictory. A malfunctioning security droid had apparently gone on a rampage and killed several prisoners as well as guards. On top of that, both Doran and Sannah had been found in the maximum security wing at the epicenter of a blast that could have only been caused by a military-grade explosive. They were found along with several domestic terrorists. All had been in too much shock to give any believable story and were sedated for security purposes.
The transport shook as it docked on the roof of the prison.
Filing out, an honor guard met them.
"Prime Minister," a warden greeted with a curt nod. "Jedi Knight Sarkin Tainer."
"Report," Deputy Prime Minister Harris said shortly.
Tyria glanced at him. In that brief moment, she had detected an unusual amount of fear and anxiety coming from the man. It was the same impression she and Doran had seen many times across their adventures, one of a politician trying to hide something. She filed it away for later, wondering what would have caused such an unusual spike of fear.
In the meantime, she kept her face impassive as the warden pretty much reiterated everything in the report. The alarms had been tripped, the terrorists had deactivated all the security cameras within the prison before they were captured, and they had no information as to what went on in the high security wing or why the Jedi apprentices were there in the first place.
"Take us to them," Tyria ordered, showing none of the worry and concern that was threatening to overwhelm her.
"As the Jedi says," Cundertol said amicably.
They were led through the prison into the medical wing. Tyria was surprised at how full it was. Badly burned victims in uniforms of the Bakuran Security Force filled the beds, as well as some members who

were simply unconscious. At the very end of the medical wing, guarded by a dozen heavily armed soldiers, were the members of the domestic terrorist group and two Jedi apprentices.
"You may stand down," Cundertol acknowledged with another nod.
"Sir?" The warden said.
"Jedi Sarkin Tainer can handle any problems. I doubt they'll try to do anything after everything that's happened." General Panib reinforced.
"Sir." The warden saluted and motioned to the soldiers and they departed the medical ward.
Tyria bypassed the curtain that separated the guarded section of the med-wing from the rest of the room.
"See to it that the Jedi apprentices are awakened," General Panib ordered.
Tyria moved to the front of their beds and waited with baited breath as the medical technicians injected both Sannah and Doran with the counter to the sedative they had been given.
Doran was first to wake, followed by Sannah. The two blinked wildly as they looked about the room, their eyes finally settling on Tyria.
"Oh," Sannah's expression went from confused to sheepish in a heartbeat.
"Errr…hi?" Doran tried.
"I believe this is the part where I ask for an explanation and the story of exactly how the two of you ended up here," Tyria said with a raised eyebrow.
"Well," Sannah began, but the next few words died on her tongue when she saw that the Deputy Prime Minister was among the gathered officials.
"It's a long story," Doran quickly covered for her. He glanced at his mom and used the Force to send her a unique signal. It was a simple code they had developed during their adventures. The galaxy was full of treachery and hidden agendas. So, when Doran was younger, Tyria had come up with a way to indicate if someone was 'bad' by highlighting them with the Force. Unless the individual they were highlighting was Force sensitive, they didn't feel a thing.
Tyria felt Doran shimmer the Deputy Prime Minister with passive Force energy and inclined her head a fraction to indicate she understood.
"You can get to the full details later," Tyria said, not missing a beat. "For now, I think we're most concerned about the company you were found in. I am told the people you were found with were leaders of an armed insurrection against the Bakuran government."
"They were set up," Doran said with a shake of his head. "The…well I guess he'd be the now former commander of the Bakuran security

forces slaughtered unarmed civilians and planted guns on them. When I tried to stop him, I was stunned and brought here. They continued to hit me with stun bolts until Sannah and the others showed up. I guess they forgot about how fast Jedi can recover."
"Speaking of the commander," General Panib said. "We have been unable to locate him. The reports we received said that he went to apprehend Malinza and the others, but he was never seen again."
"That's because he blew up," Doran answered with a blink.
"Doran," Tyria said in her I'm-your-mother-so-you-better-explain voice.
"He was a droid of some kind," Sannah answered in Doran's place. "When we damaged him enough, he activated some type of self-destruct and exploded."
"I find that hard to believe," Deputy Prime Minister Harris scowled. "You're saying that one of our most trusted leaders was a robot in disguise and he blew himself up? How convenient."
Sannah reached into her jumpsuit and tossed something at the Deputy Prime Minister. The man caught it, and immediately dropped it when he saw what it was. "That evidence enough? You'll forgive me, Prime Minister, Master Sarkin Tainer, but I've crawled through two kilometers of pipes, ran through more hallways than I care to count, been shot at, faced a murderous robot who executed an acquaintance right in front of me, survived an explosion, and drugged, all in the past day. I'm *really* not in the mood for your skepticism. "
"Go Fish-Girl," Doran muttered under his breath.
Prime Minister Cundertol picked up the dropped piece of evidence. It was the arm Sannah had severed. "My word! How is this possible?"
"Did this droid imposter say anything to you? Perhaps the real commander is still alive," General Panib said, feeling the artificial arm as it was passed over to him.
"Only how someone high in the government ordered everyone in the Freedom, but Malinza to be killed," Sannah answered. "He killed Zel to make that point perfectly clear."
"No names?" Deputy Prime Minister Harris said sharply.
"None," Doran said, silently communicating to the others to go along with the story. "But whoever it was wanted to destabilize the government, and from the sounds of it, use Malinza to rally support for some cause."
"I'll start an investigation at once, Prime Minister," Harris said briskly. "We can't have traitors within our own government undermine everything we've been striving to build."

"Yes, yes," Cundertol said eagerly. "Start at once. We have only just begun negotiations with the P'w'eck. It will be disastrous if anything should happen before the treaty is signed."
"About that, Prime Minister," Tyria said. "I've invited elements of several Galactic Alliance fleets to be present during the signing. It will be a momentous occasion after all."
"Please," Cundertol looked embarrassed. "That's hardly necessary. I mean, aren't the fleets busy fighting the Yuuzhan Vong? A small, quiet ceremony would be much better for everyone, especially given the schemes that we only just seem to be learning about."
"Oh, but I insist," Tyria pressed with a smile, weaving the Force into her words. "The Galactic Alliance is starting anew, just as the relations with the Bakuran and P'w'eck appear to be. What better way to celebrate new beginnings than by doing so together?"
"An excellent idea," General Panib said. "Your government's show of support will be most welcome as we head into a new era."
Cundertol's smiled looked a bit forced, but the Prime Minister nodded. "Oh very well. But I will of course have to run this by Lwothin and Keeramak. They are a religious people after all."
"Of course. I have been told a New Republic fleet is nearby in any case, so any invitation would not be an undue burden on them," Tyria said congenially. She wondered if Cundertol was just naïve, incompetent, or dangerous, or a combination of the three. "Now, with regards to… Malinza, was it? And her people."
"They are still terrorists," Deputy Prime Minister Harris said.
"But if they were framed them for one act, there could be others that we are not aware of," Tyria pointed out diplomatically. "At the very least can you not just put them under house arrest for now? Whoever wishes them dead will most likely come after them again, and we need to be ready for those assassins when they do."
"That sounds fine to me," Cundertol said, recovering some of his perpetual cheer. "General Panib, can you find a safe-house for these political activists? It will not do for Malinza to be killed on our watch. Not after what her parents contributed to Bakura."
"I'll get right on it, sir," General Panib saluted. He then went off and began consulting in low tones with Malinza.
"Well, I best get started on my investigation," Deputy Prime Minister Harris said. "Prime Minister, Jedi. I bid you good day."
)-(V)-(
The moment they were within the privacy of the *Kell Dragon* Tyria immediately gathered the two teenagers into a heartfelt hug.

"What did I say about not attracting attention to yourselves?" She said in exasperation, her eyes closed as she tightly held the two of them to her.
"Sorry mom."
"Sorry Tyria."
Tyria exhaled and sat back in the pilot's seat, glancing at the two.
"Okay, Doran. Explain why you shimmered Deputy Prime Minister Harris?"
"And why you didn't tell Cundertol about him," Sannah added. "The droid commander, imposter, whatever he was, said he took orders from Harris. Doesn't that mean Cundertol should know his deputy is plotting behind his back?"
"That's answers my question," Tyria said dryly. "But I think I can answer yours, Sannah."
"Another one of the many Wraith Squadron rules," Doran nodded, before his mom could continue. "If the crafty bad guy is backed into a corner, people tend to die. Give crafty bad guy enough rope to hang himself and he'll do most of the work for you."
"Should I just let the two of you talk amongst yourselves?" Tyria arched an eyebrow.
"Sorry mom," Doran said automatically.
"Never mind." Tyria sighed. "I think the situation has definitely become serious enough to call in help."
"What do you mean?" Sannah asked.
"Cundertol's reaction to having a Galactic Alliance observer force on hand wasn't exactly the most positive," Tyria said. "And if Deputy Prime Minister Harris is not only backing the possible treaty, but involved in some shadowy scheme revolving around Malinza, there's more to this than we are seeing."
"That's what Commander Droid, said," Sannah agreed. "He said that we didn't know anything about what was really happening on this planet."
The comm system for the ship chirped.
"I'm sorry if I'm interrupting anything."
"No, it's okay, Prime Minister," Tyria said graciously. "How can we help you?"
"Well, I ran by your proposal with Lwothin, and he took it to the Keeramak. I'm afraid their superstitions have gotten the better of them. They'll be more than happy to negotiate terms with the Galactic Alliance once their treaty with Bakura is settled, but they don't wish to invite any bad blood to these new beginnings."
"Is that so?" Tyria said neutrally.

"I'm terribly sorry about that. You know how religious the Ssi-ruuk and P'w'eck are. They're even having me go over to their space to work out the initial aspects of our treaty with the Keeramak himself because our planet isn't consecrated according to their customs."
"I'm sorry about that too. When do you leave?"
"To best accommodate the Galactic Alliance, the Keeramak wishes to expedite the treaty signing as soon as possible. I am leaving first thing tomorrow and should be back by the end of the week. After that, it's all a matter of having their priests consecrate our planet for the final signing on Bakuran soil."
"And what about the rest of Bakura?" Sannah said, unable to stop herself. "Don't they have a say in the treaty too?"
"Naturally," Prime Minister Cundertol's voice was congenial. *"After I return from the negotiations, I shall put the treaty up to a planet-wide vote. Since an alliance with the P'w'eck would only benefit Bakura, I don't see a reason why it shouldn't pass."*
"We'll eagerly await your return, Prime Minister. I hope this treaty really works out for everyone," Tyria said.
"As do I. Cundertol, out."
Another chirping indicated a second communication's link being set up. "This is the *Kell Dragon,* we're receiving you, *Dancing Droid.* Where the blazes have you been?"
Instead of a response from the ship, a HoloNet news feed was piped in over the *Kell Dragon*'s speakers.
"In other news, a powerful virus has apparently infected all models of droids from the factories of Onadax Droid Technologies. It is unknown who unleashed the virus or if it was just a prank, but we are told that the base-code for all the droids was altered so that the only thing the droids were capable of was dancing. Attempts to repair the code or insert new code have failed, leading officials to believe that this was the work of a disgruntled insider with knowledge of ODT's operational standards and programs. At the moment this incident is being treated as a serious crime, however, due to the destruction of ODT's primary droid production factory. This occurred when several of the security droids accidently detonated the building's primary forge when they danced into it while loaded down with munitions. The company's CEO, Stanton Rendar, was not available for comment; though a droid in his likeness was discovered performing the complete works of holodrama actor Tetran Cowall while dancing the Coruscanti Waltz..."
"Okay?" Tyria said, confused. "Aside from showing off and proving that you're once again the best hacker and droid builder in the galaxy, what was that about?"

"The droid in Stanton Rendar's likeness <u>was</u> Stanton Rendar," came the response from the pilot of the *Dancing Droid.*
"Wait a minute," Sannah said quickly. "ODT is Onadax Droid Technologies."
"Yes."
"Tyria! Malinza said that the commander Cundertol hired to be his head of his security forces was the former head of security at ODT," Sannah said quickly. She looked back to the hologram of the *Dancing Droid's* pilot. "Did Stanton Rendar look, and for all intents and purposes, act like a real human?"
"I was getting to that. And I'm not surprised if you found another droid similar to Stanton Rendar's. His company was preparing to roll out a whole line of Human Replica Droids."
"Was?" Tyria raised an eyebrow.
"He shot at me so I had his droids walk into the furnace." The captain of the one-man ship pouted. *"All I asked was if I could look at his base-code. Maybe I should have waited for the second date to ask that, but still. I was amazed at how non-droid like he was. He seemed surprise that I could tell he was a droid, and began waxing about the benefits of never getting sick, old, or tired. I must admit, I was pretty tempted, but then again, droids can be reprogramed easily, people not so much."*
"Yeah, for all his benefits, you still reprogrammed him and made him dance," Doran chuckled.
The hooded hologram looked to the side, as if ashamed. *"Yeah, I don't like killing, but I'll do it if I have to."*
"Wait, killing?" Tyria blinked. "But it was just a droid."
"Like I said, Stanton Rendar's likeness was Stanton Rendar. The guy deliberately entechted himself into a droid-replica of himself using a modified entechment device of some kind. The only way I got him to dance and re-enact those holodramas was by wiping out the electronic imprint of who he was. In a sense, I killed him."
At that, the cockpit of the *Kell Dragon* fell quiet.
"entechment. That's Ssi-ruuvi tech," Tyria finally managed.
"I know. I don't know what's happening on Bakura, but if one of the HRD's made it out to there and Ssi-ruuvi tech made it to Onadax, something fishy's going on. I'm still in orbit around Onadax at the moment to see if I can gather any more information. But you won't have to worry about any more Human Replica Droids popping up. Unless Stanton sent out a few more, I completely trashed their production facility."
"Thanks for the heads-up," Tyria breathed. The holopad dimmed, and Tyria looked to the others. "We definitely need to find out what we're

missing. Let's talk with Malinza and the others to see if they can shed any more light on this."
"And what about Deputy Prime Minister Harris? With Cundertol off to Ssi-ruuvi space, Harris will be the one in charge," Doran voiced.
"I feel that things are a lot more connected than we can see," Tyria said softly. "For now, the two of you will stick with me. If entechment tech has made it out of Ssi-ruuk space, there's no telling what secrets Harris, and whoever else he's working, with are hiding."
)-(VI)-(
It was the next day, after Prime Minister Cundertol had left with Lwothin and the P'w'eck delegation for Ssi-ruuk space, when Doran and Sannah followed Tyria into the safe-house General Panib had set up for the members of the Freedom. The safe-house was located in the countryside, away from the city, and had two military speeders out in front guarding it.
"You're back," Malinza sounded surprised as she saw Sannah."Jedi keep their word," Sannah said. The surviving members of Freedom were seated at dining room table. "Salkeli, you survived?"
The Rodian made a face. "I was stunned by one of the security droids after Zel stupidly set off the alarms. He was always better at bragging about his slicing skills than he actually was."
"Hey, show some respect, he was our friend," Jjorg hissed.
"Who nearly got us all killed," Salkeli retorted. "We're all lucky to be alive."
"Anyway," Malinza said a bit more loudly than the others to cut off their bickering. "What brings you to our prettied up prison?"
Sannah looked to Tyria, but the older woman made a gesture that suggested Sannah should answer the question. "What do you know of Onadax Droid Technologies?"
"ODT? Why?" Malinza blinked in confusion.
"We discovered the origin of droid designed to look like the commander of the security forces," Sannah said. "He was made in an ODT factory."
"Really?" Salkeli sounded skeptical. "Onadax is one of Bakura's major trading partners. The Salis D'aar Penitentiary uses ODT droids for both security and maintenance purposes. Are you saying that ODT is making human-like droids now?"
"I know it sounds hard to believe, but it's true," Sannah nodded. "We even have evidence that they were starting to manufacture what they called Human Replic Droids."
"That's all good and everything, but what does that have to do with Bakura?" Vyram asked.

"You mentioned earlier that it was Cundertol who hired this commander, right?" Sannah said.
"It was his office," Malinza answered. "The man who previously had the position died shortly after running against Cundertol in the last election. Any candidate to that position needs to be approved by the Office of the Prime Minister."
"So you don't know who exactly hired this commander?" Tyria spoke up, keeping note of the expressions and emotions coming from each member of the Freedom.
Malinza glanced back at her friends. Then held Tyria's gaze, as if challenging her. "No. The only thing we knew about him was what Deputy Prime Minister Harris told us, that he was the former head of security at ODT."
Tyria began blinking when she realized that Malinza's thoughts were blaringly loud as she continued to maintain eye-contact. It was as if she *wanted* Tyria to read her mind.
We didn't tell Salkeli about Harris. We didn't tell Salkeli about Harris. Salkeli doesn't know about Harris.
Tyria raised an eyebrow, but showed no reaction otherwise. "So Deputy Prime Minister Harris has been helping you all this time?"
"He has," Malinza pretended to admit.
"Malinza," Salkeli protested.
Malinza glanced back to the Rodian. "Salkeli, we have to be honest with the Jedi. Thing have gone far out of our control and we need their help to get them back on track. Besides, telling her won't exactly harm anyone. She's a student of Uncle Luke's."
Salkeli huffed, but didn't say anything else.
"Is it possible that the commander was brought in by Harris and approved by him? Harris is a part of Cundertol's office," Tyria asked.
"Now that you mention it," Jjorg spoke up, "That does make sense. Cundertol's always been a little out of touch when it comes to his own people and office. He has his own visions, his way of doing things, which keeps him apart from everyone. He leans heavily on General Panib and Harris to get anything done. Heck, I wouldn't be surprise if they could run the government without him."
"So if anything, Cundertol could be controlled by Panib and Harris?" Doran said.
"He'd be dumb enough to listen to their advice," Jjorg agreed. "Panib's not a bad guy, though. He's just more of a military man than a politician. And Harris has always had the interests of Bakura at heart. He's actually helped to reign in some of Cundertol's more outlandish ideas."

"Making Harris his Deputy Prime Minister was probably the only bright thing he did," Salkeli said with a careless shrug.
"Cundertol chose Harris?" Tyria said.
"Yeah, this past election. The moment he was re-elected as Prime Minister, he insisted that no one else was better for the job."
"Mom?" Doran looked to his mother, sensing her mind work.
"Later."
They heard a speeder pull up outside the house and everyone's attention went to the door. A man in a military uniform entered the house and headed straight for Malinza.
"Malinza Thanas," the man said.
"Yes?"
"Deputy Prime Minister Harris has investigated and arrested several members of the government who were plotting against Cundertol. He believes the threat against you and the others has passed and you are free to go."
"That was quick."
"Deputy Prime Minister Harris takes threats against the safety of Bakura seriously. He has not slept since learning of the potential traitors," the soldier said. "I am happy to inform you that you are safe and free to continue your efforts to reform the government, provided they remain peaceful and within the law."
"Thank you," Malinza said carefully, her eyes briefly flicking to Tyria.
"Please tell Deputy Prime Minister Harris that we are grateful for his hard work. If he does not object, we will inform the people of Bakura of the plot that threatened their safety as well as the treaty the Prime Minister is attempting to negotiate with the P'w'eck."
"He anticipated that you would ask this, and he grants his full blessing," the soldier nodded.
"He always does what's best for the people," Malinza said with a forced smile. "Thank you again."
The soldier inclined his head and then left on the speeder he had come.
"That was surprising," Salkeli blinked.
"That's an understatement," Jjorg said.
"Do you really think the threat's passed?" Vyram looked to the others.
"It doesn't really matter now, does it," Malinza shrugged. "We've just been evicted from this safe-house."
"If you want, we can escort your group back to your headquarters," Sannah offered.

Malinza agreed. "That would be helpful, Jedi Sannah. But then, we must part ways there. We have helped you, you have helped us, the Balance is satisfied. The Freedom must create change on Bakura on their own."

)-(VII)-(

"Tyria, come in, damn it!" The frantic yell of Alex Winger greeted the three Jedi as they re-boarded the *Kell Dragon* later in the evening. Tyria quickly moved to the communication's console. "Alex?"

"Finally! Listen, the Webley II's lost long range communications and propulsion . We were lucky enough to make the jump to hyperspace as it is!"

"Alex, wait a minute, what are you talking about?"

"The Ssi.... Not overthrown! ... peace-treaty...trap!"

"What?" Tyria shouted. "Alex, there's a lot of static coming in with your transmission!"

"The Ssi-ruuvi Imperium still exists!" Alex shouted, desperate to get her point across. *"A full battle fleet mobilized this morning shortly after the Prime Minister's ship left Bakuran space. The peace-treaty is a trap! I repeat, the peace treaty is a..."*

"Captain! The Ssi-ruuk followed us out of hyperspace!" A voice yelled in the background.

"Sithspawn! Abandon ship! Tyria, warn the Bakurans! The Ssi-ruuk are coming!" With that, the transmission went dead.

Tyria, Doran, and Sannah stared in horror at the communication's module, momentarily transfixed by Alex's message.

"Will she be alright?" Sannah whispered hoarsely.

"She will," Tyria swallowed. "She's been in worse scrapes than that. What we need to do is warn General Panib and Deputy Prime Minister Harris."

"But the Ssi-ruuk can't attack," Doran frowned. "They haven't sanctified this planet."

"They have," a voice called out from outside the open hatch of the ship.

They glanced out the hatch to see Malinza and the other members of Freedom, minus the Rodian Salkeli, their expressions grim.

"Malinza?" Tyria emerged from the ship.

"This planet has already been sanctified," Malinza held out a datapad. "Zel came across some old recordings when he was in the Salis D'aar's systems. Deputy Prime Minister Harris has been planning this for a long time."

"Is that why Salkeli isn't with you?" Sannah asked.

"Yeah," Malinza nodded with a clenched jaw. "Zel wouldn't have tripped the security alarms. He was too good. After we were let go

from the safe-house, Vyram and I went back to the penitentiary to see if we could uncover anything else."
"According to this, Harris made a deal with the Ssi-ruuk nearly eight months ago when he was the Minister of Commerce," Tyria scrolled through the data with a frown. "As a 'gesture of good faith' he began exporting prisoners to the Imperium for the purposes of entechment. Mostly those on death row, or ones who wouldn't be missed. He was the one who arranged for ODT to obtain the entechment tech for their human replica bots. Shortly after the P'w'eck made contact, Harris smuggled a Ssi-ruuk priest onto Bakura for a secret sanctioning?"
"Yeah," Malinza said grimly. "Everything Cundertol has been going through, the talks about a possible treaty, is all just an act to make the Bakurans happily welcome the Ssi-ruuk ships."
"And this data was just sitting in the prison database?" Doran said with a frown.
"No," Malinza shook her head. "A Ryn technician at the prison made a backup copy of the data before Harris had his lackeys delete it. When Vyram and I went back to investigate, the Ryn found us and warned us things weren't what they seemed. He then gave us that data."
"The Ryn?" Tyria blinked. "That's surprising. Anyway, according to the data, Cundertol is just a puppet being used by Harris. And Harris is in league with the Ssi-ruuk."
"Worse," Doran said, his voice filled with anxious dread. "If Harris already had Bakura sanctified, the Ssi-ruuk are free to attack."
Tyria spun to Sannah. "Contact General Farlander and let him know we need his ships ASAP! Then tell General Panib to mobilize the Bakuran Defense Forces."
"On it!" The Melodie teen sprinted back into the ship.
"Doran, stay with her and prep the *Kell Dragon* for space battle."
"What about you, mom?"
"I'm going with Malinza. We need to have a talk with Harris."
)-(VIII)-(
After some preparation, Tyria, flanked by Malinza, Vyram, and Jjrog, ascended the steps of the capital building just as night fell. The street lights were all in the process of turning on and the lights from the buildings around them began to shine as the last rays of the sun dipped below the horizon. They passed through the glass doors of the atrium and walked up to the front desk.
"Please inform Deputy Prime Minister Harris that Jedi Tyria Sarkin-Tainer is here to speak with him," Tyria said to the droid receptionist.

"One moment please." The receptionists' optical sensors flicked on and off in an imitation of a blink. "Deputy Prime Minister Harris will see you now."
"Thank you."
They filled into a turbolift that shuttled them to the top of the building. When the doors opened, the group entered a spacious office occupied by three individuals and a translator droid. A fine carpet covered the floor and stately drapes covered windows that would have otherwise give the office a clear view of the city.
"Salkeli," Malinza acknowledged one of the three in the office.
"Malinza?" the Rodian seemed surprised to see them and he anxiously looked over his shoulder towards the Deputy Prime Minister.
"Jedi Sarkin-Tainer," Harris said congenially, straightening in his chair. "What can I do for you?"
"You can explain why you've sold out the people of Bakura," Malinza hissed, stepping forward and shrugging off Tyria's hand. "You too, Salkeli. I thought you were for a brighter future for our people!"
"Don't get so high and mighty, Malinza," Salkeli retorted. "I *am* doing this for the future of Bakura."
"Really? Because giving us up to the Ssi-ruuk isn't exactly a future," Jjorg said, her anger at being betrayed making her clench her fists. "When Malinza first began suspecting you, I backed you up. Said that there was some other explanation. How could you do this to all of us?"
"Deputy Prime Minister," Tyria said, using the Force to silence the others. She then motioned to the third individual in the room, the P'w'eck representative, Lwothin. "We have reason to believe that the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium is still in existence and is on their way to Bakura at this very moment."
"Is that so?" Harris said. "And how do you know this?"
"We had elements of the Galactic Alliance patrolling the border since we became aware of a possible treaty between you and the P'w'eck," Tyria stretched. "They were engaged by the Ssi-ruuk and heavily damaged."
Harris swallowed nervously and folded his hands, hidden in the folds of his scarlet robe, on the desk in front of him. "Perhaps it's a misunderstanding."
"Harris," Tyria tried a different tactic. "We have evidence that you've made a deal with the Ssi-ruuk and tried to erase all records of your meetings. We've already sent General Panib a copy of the evidence, and he's informed Prime Minister Cundertol."

At that, Harris let out a laugh, his demeanor changing in an instant. "You Jedi, always sticking your noses where they don't belong. You really think you have the full story, do you?"
"Why don't you tell me the full story then?" Tyria said patiently, keeping her senses attuned to any danger.
"You too, Salkeli," Malinza said. "You were responsible for those rallies that went out of control, weren't you? Why? Why try to frame us and destroy everything we've tried to do?"
"Destroy everything?" Salkeli chortled. "Malinza, you've got me all wrong. I'm trying to do the job we set out to do; unite Bakura against the Galactic Alliance, ensure that it's as safe as it can be from outside invasion. Harris was the only one who had the foresight needed to make our plans come to fruition."
"You're insane," Malinza said with wide eyes.
"Really, aren't you being a bit harsh on your friend?" Harris said with a smile. "With the Ssi-ruuk helping us, Bakura will govern our own destiny forever. The only difference is that instead of rallying around you, Malinza, they shall unite around me."
"I can't see them supporting someone who's sold them to the Imperium," Malinza seethed.
"You said it yourself, Malinza," Salkeli spoke up. "The people of Bakura are sheep. They'll believe whatever their beloved government tells them."
"And oh will they listen," Harris said in amusement. "Again betrayed by the Jedi who have come to save us. Jedi who murdered the beloved daughter of our former leaders and nearly killed their Deputy Prime Minister. Your tragic death will be the spark everyone needs to rise up against the Galactic Alliance and seize their own destiny."
Harris pressed a button on his desk, and two slats in the wall behind him opened. A squadron of security droids marched into the room with blasters at the ready. "Now, surrender. The alternative is much more unpleasant."
"Indeed," Tyria said calmly. She looked to Vyram, who had stayed silent throughout the exchange. "You get all that?"
"Every pixel, every sound bite," Vyram nodded grimly.
Harris' expression froze in a forced smile. "What do you mean?"
"You see, Deputy Prime Minister Harris," Tyria sighed, running a hand through her hair and shaking her head. "You wouldn't be the first corrupt politician that I've had to go up against. Sadly, you probably won't be the last. But the most predictable thing about corrupt politicians is that when they think they've won, they just *have* to spill

out their grand plan and boast about how smart and clever they are. You politicians love your speeches after all."
"By now, all of Bakura has heard your plan to get them enteched for the greater good of the Balance," Malinza said.
"Surrender," Tyria commanded, injecting the full extent of her Force abilities into her order. "The people of Bakura should decide their own fate, not have their fate decided for them."
Harris' jaw worked as he tried to fight off the suggestion. The security droids were immobile as they awaited further orders. But Salkeli, seeing the situation rapidly deteriorating, acted first. He yanked one of the blaster rifles from the hands of a nearby droid and opened fire.
Jjorg twitched as the ruby red darts pierced her body, dropping her to the ground. Vyram quickly tackled Malinza out of the way, getting hit in the leg by another blaster bolt in the process.
Tyria thrust her hand out, and a wave of Force energy sent the Rodian flying backwards through the bay window. Salkeli let out a terrified cry and dropped the blaster as he instinctively thrust his hands out to grab onto anything he could. He needn't have bothered. Tyria kept her eyes closed, focused on holding the Rodian in mid-air.
This meant that Harris was now free of her Force suggestion, however. He produced his own blaster and aimed it at Tyria. The blond Jedi flung Salkeli back through the window, and the Rodian collided into Harris, the two of them toppling to the office floor as the Deputy Prime Minister's chair flipped over.
Malinza hurried to Jjorg's side, but it was clear that the young woman had been killed by Salkeli's brash act. Eyes blazing, Malinza glared sharply at the co-conspirators. "Was your selfishness worth it all? How many more have to die?"
"As few as possible," Tyria replied softly. She held her comlink up. "General Panib. The situation on the planet is under control."
"That's good to hear. The Galactic Alliance vessels Mon Adapyne and Pride of Selonia have just dropped out of hyperspace to join us. But unless we get help soon, we're in no shape to repel a Ssi-ruuk invasion force."
At that, the P'w'eck representative, Lwothin, stepped back towards the center of the room. He let out an almost musical flurry of sounds. The translator droid, glancing at its heavily armed counterparts, timidly conveyed Lwothin's message.
"The P'w'eck Emancipation Movement representative claims that his people will fight alongside the Bakurans."
"Really?" Tyria looked to Lwothin. "Your people tried to deceive the Bakurans before, how is now any different?"

"[The Keeramak commanded us to deceive you, so we did. But in doing so, he showed us that the P'w'eck can indeed be free of the Ssi-ruuk. The Ssi-ruuk need the P'w'eck, but the reverse is not true. If you refrain from shooting at any of the enteched fighters, we will show you that the P'w'eck will keep their word to the people of Bakura and help defend them from any invasion.]"
Tyria studied the P'w'eck, sensing no deception from him. "Very well. General Panib. The P'w'eck will fight for us. Don't fire on the fighters."
"Are you certain?"
Tyria managed a weak smile. "We're not really any worse off if I'm wrong."
"Good point," the general snorted. *"If we survive this, Bakura owes another debt to the Jedi."*
"No debts," Tyria shook her head. "Saving the galaxy is our job. You just help bring Bakura into a brighter, happier future and we'll call it even."
"Understood. I've mobilized the ground units as well as we can expect some landing ships to break through."
"And what of Prime Minister Cundertol?"
"No word from his shuttle. I would have people searching for him, but we need every ship we have at the moment."
"We'll worry about him later, then," Tyria said. "Right now, we have a planet to save."
"Galaxies, planets, is there anything a Jedi doesn't have to save?"
"Nope, want to trade jobs?" Tyria chuckled.
General Panib likewise emitted an amused laugh, mostly to defuse the tension of the situation. *"Not on your life, Jedi Sarkin Tainer. I'm happy with just looking after Bakura. Maybe when..."* A beeping sound could be heard in the background and the good-nature left General Panib's voice instantly. *"Jedi Sarkin Tainer, the Ssi-ruuk have arrived."*
)-(Chapter End)-(
A\N: I somehow manage to conclude both story arcs by next chapter, which will be up next **Wednesday** afternoon/evening-ish depending on where you live. And since I'm trying to force myself over a small writer's block, I'm keeping the regular Sunday update (an interlude) as well. (Hopefully this is a one-time thing!). It's not a serious writer's block, more of a 'the-ending-is-so-close-can't-I-skip-the-in-between-stuff-and-just-write-the-final-chapter' type of writer's block. I already have the final battles and dialogue playing in my head but I'm extremely terrible at predicting what will be in my chapters, so if I write the scene in advance, it probably won't match up to the chapters that come before it =).

For this chapter, I did my best to distill the canon Bakura story-arc to its basic plot ideas, i.e. everyone scheming, people dying, the Freedom yelling loudly and being used as a pawn, and the poor Jedi getting caught in the middle of it all (not in that order and minus the Tahiri-goes-insane arc), but I had always found it the most confusing of the NJO books. The Bakura arc in this chapter was a pain in the *shebs* to write and if I had been able to come up with a different side-plot for Doran and Sannah, I probably would have cut the entire Bakura plot from this story. Nevertheless, I hope you all enjoyed it. Any type of feedback is more than welcome.

Anon review response:

JediMasterDraco- The challenge you gave me is one I've already set for myself...=). Now for your real review, in numerical fashion... 5. There are SANE Jedi? 15. Too late, idea given. Besides, the 'Hapans and the Sand People' sounds like another band name, maybe they can join up with Abeloth's tour with their hit singles 'Sand Palace' and 'Heated Gaze'. (yes, I already thought up the lyrics for the first verses of each, you really have to stop giving me those kooky ideas, wise o Jedi Master) =p. 22. Capital of Aube is *Troye*, Lord Denning was a British judge...yeah, a stretch, but I did warn you that the references were obscure. 23. Honestly, I didn't. You didn't call Vergere by a bird name so I just wookiepedia-ed Sith Witches and it gave me the Nightsisters (entirely your fault this time). 30. Can't take credit for homicidal Jawas, I think Luke or Leia run into them chasing after the Kilik Twilight painting on Tatooine in I think its the *Tatooine Ghost* (by Denning). 34. Not very well, they stick their heads in the ground and hope everyone else goes away. 35. No, yes. 38. Scene actually inspired by KOTOR's desert wraids and those big spiky-hedgehog creatures and the footfall sounds they make as they chase my character around in circles. 43. One of those names is not like the others...unless I somehow manage to make Lestrange into a dark Jedi who gets killed by a red-headed mother protecting her daughter during an assault on a castle-like structure in the sequel (told you you should stop with those kooky ideas). 46. She's already jumped Jag, what more do you want =D...oh, wrong urges? 57. You mean I have to kill him off so he won't ever tell annoying jokes again and *then* I can get my two male deer? 63. So ends my longest numerically-tallied review to date...thanks again!

ADA 36

Thirty-Six
)-(I)-(

Sannah reflexively reached out to grip Doran's hand at the sight of the massive Ssi-ruuvi armada that had just dropped out of hyperspace. Now that subtly was no longer needed, the Ssi-ruuk had gone all out with their invasion force. In comparison, the few ships Bakura and the Galactic Alliance had managed to muster were woefully outgunned and outnumbered.

Doran likewise swallowed nervously, turning his hand over so that his and Sannah's fingers could lace together. "Some adventure, yeah?"

"Yeah," Sannah managed with a fearful smile.

Through the battlemeld set up by General Farlander's Jedi advisor, the Anx Jedi Master Madurrin, they could feel support come in from the other Jedi in the meld. Kirk Dekim had arrived in his own gunship, the *Quixotic Seeker,* just in time for the battle. While Alex Winger had survived her encounter with the Ssi-ruuvi battle fleet thanks to Jedi Knight Waxarn Kel, who had been serving aboard the *Pride of Selonia* and had been in position to respond to the *Webley II*'s distress signal.

"This is General Panib, all forces form up. Things are going to be rough. Stick to the plan and hopefully we'll all get out of this alive."

The plan had been formulated only moments before, and it wasn't exactly a reassuring one. It more or less involved the voluntary capture of every single Galactic Alliance and Bakuran fighter. The fighters would allow the Ssi-ruuvi ships to bring them in for entechment, counting on the P'w'eck to destroy the powerful tractor beams in time. The said tractor beams would bring the fighters and gunboats pass the shields of the Ssi-ruuvi capital ships, where the large cruisers would be defenseless to any attack. It all hinged on whether or not the P'w'eck would indeed throw off the Ssi-ruuk, as Lwothin had promised. If things went badly, every single fighter-pilot and gunboat crew would soon join the P'w'eck in the entechment machines.

And being in a gunboat, it also meant that both Sannah and Doran were included with those at high risk for entechment. Tyria had definitely hated the idea, but it was the only possible way Bakura could win against such a massive Ssi-ruuvi fleet.

The Ssi-ruuk had fielded nearly thirty capital ships and several hundred fighters. The Bakuran Defense Force had only eight capital ships, plus the two ships of the Galactic Alliance, and barely sixty fighters. The odds were very obvious. As was the need for an unconventional plan.

"If this doesn't work," Sannah whispered, yellow eyes glancing back out towards the approaching Ssi-ruuvi fleet. "I…I want to say that I…"
Doran pressed a finger to her lips and shook his head. "It'll work. Think positive thoughts, Fish-Girl."
Sannah pouted behind his finger, but nodded resolutely. "Fine. You're probably right."
Doran returned his attention to the steering yoke. "I hope."
"Doran!" Sannah groaned.
Doran gestured to the fleet. "Hey, it's my first time staring down an invading enemy fleet bent on planetary domination, who also wants to suck my soul out. I'm new at this sort of thing too."
"You're also new at reassuring your girlfriend that her soul won't get sucked up and crammed into some machine," Sannah said with a shake of her head.
"In my defense, there aren't many situations where I get to practice that."
Sannah let out a weak laugh, but then grew serious as the Ssi-ruuvi fleet began to open fire. "Here we go."
"Yeah," Doran swallowed nervously. Their ship rocked as a nearby heavy cruiser laid down a scathing line of laser fire. The line of snail-shell looking ships were relentlessly battering the Galactic Alliance and Bakuran capital ships as they closed in on Bakura itself. Within the screen of laser and ion fire, a wave of landing ships surged forward. And through it all, the hundreds of triangle-shaped P'w'eck crewed fighters swarmed with frightening precision. "Heads up, mom. Several dozen landing ships are going to break through."
"Hey, I know we have the plan. But can you try to make <u>some</u> effort to stop them," Tyria replied with forced cheer.
"We'll try," Doran sent back. The *Kell Dragon* barreled through the storm of laser fire, followed by the fighter squadrons from the *Pride of Selonia.*
Waxam Kel's darkly-named Death Knight Squadron lit up several of the landing ships on the first pass as Doran and Sannah used the *Kell Dragon's* highly illegally, heavily modified, overpowered shield generators, created by Kell Tainer for his family, to soak up the majority of the incoming fire. The *Kell Dragon* may not have been heavily armed, but Kell Tainer wasn't going to let his family gallivant around the unknown reaches of space without some knowledge that they were safe.
Within the faint battle meld, Doran and Sannah could sense where Waxam Kel was going to take his squadron next, and continued to fly ahead of them acting as a shield. It also helped that the innumerable

P'w'eck-controlled fighters were firing their own lasers at half-power, doing little to the Galactic Alliance vessels but making their shields flare impressively under the concentrated, but weakened, barrages. Several Ssi-ruuvi landing ships erupted into balls of flame as Waxam Kel's squadron finished them off on a second pass. While another transport was left on fire and made a hasty retreat. But there were still too many transports, too many Ssi-ruuvi capital ships laying down suppressing fire, to stop them all.
"We're about to lose our deflector shields!" Sannah warned, after their ship was rocked by a volley from two Shree-class battle cruisers rapidly closing in on them. Death Knight squadron was already caught up in the tractor beam of another Ssi-ruuvi vessel and was out of the fight.
"The auxiliary shields should kick in, give us another few minutes," Doran said reassuringly, swinging the *Kell Dragon* around to make one last run on a landing ship.
"Auxiliary?" Sannah blinked, glancing back at the control panel as the alarms stopped.
"Dad made sure mom and I would be safe out here," Doran smiled faintly. "The *Kell Dragon* may only have a single quad-laser turret, but it sacrificed its missile launching system and ion cannons for heavy duty shield generators. We're safer here than on a Star Destroyer."
"You mean like that Star Destroyer?" Sannah pointed out one of the Bakuran Star Destroyers, completely engulfed in a blaze of fire and already being sucked into the planet's gravity well.
Doran winced. "Yeah."
Their ship rocked again, and the alarms returned. This time, all momentum was halted as a powerful tractor beam latched onto their vessel.
"Maybe I spoke too soon," Doran whispered, glancing fearfully out the viewport at the massive shell-like ship that was drawing them in.
"Doran?" Sannah said in a small voice.
He shifted and pulled the frightened Melodie teen from the co-pilot chair and onto his lap in a hug meant to reassure the both of them. Despite knowing that this was part of the plan, relying on the unknown allegiance of the P'w'eck was heart pounding. They did their best to synchronize their breathing, calming each other as the Ssi-ruuvi ship grew closer and closer. Force exercises failing them, they just held each other, their eyes squeezing shut as the maw-like opening of the landing bay, and the dreaded entechment machines, came into view.
All around the battlefield, the Ssi-ruuvi ships were pulling in the helplessly outnumbered Galactic Alliance and Bakuran fighters into their hold, while boarding teams were being dispatched to capture the

heavily damaged capital ships. The fighting had been fierce, but appeared to have been for naught.
As the Ssi-ruuvi's swarm of triangle fighters reformed alongside their carrier vessels, a signal was transmitted to all the captured vessels. In unison, the P'w'eck controlled fighters opened fire on the larger ships' engines, tractor beam emitters, weapons, and any other location of importance. Landing bays were lit up, bridges shattered. The crippling surprise attack taking the Ssi-ruuk completely off-guard.
The Galactic Alliance and Bakuran fighters were instantly freed, and whoops of laughter rang out over the comm as they joined in the counter-attack. Within the Ssi-ruuvi capital ships' shields, the invasion fleet was completely and utterly defenseless.
In a matter of seconds, nearly the entire invasion fleet had been reduced to shattered wrecks. The few capital ships and picketships that had managed to maneuver far enough away from Bakura to jump to hyperspace, did so without a moment's delay. This left the dozen or so landing ships that had managed to touch down as the only remnants left.
)-(II)-(
Tyria was leading the defense of Bakura on the ground, alongside Lwothin and several P'w'eck who had landed in commandeered assault craft. Despite the loss of their fleet, the Ssi-ruuk shocktroopers were religious fanatics who would happily die for their Imperium. With the planet consecrated, they had no fear of death, and it showed in suicidal way they charged the Bakuran lines around the capital building.
Paddle-beamers lanced out, picking off members of the ground defenders, while laser fire streaked back in turn. A wave of Ssi-ruuk braved the constant blaster fire to overrun a Defense Force position, only to be mowed down by a second line of defenders reinforced with the P'w'eck soldiers.
"There," Tyria spotted a larger than normal, brightly colored Ssi-ruuk giving orders to the troops amassed around him.
The translation droid relayed Lwothin's reply. "Lwothin indicates that that is the Keeramak. Slaying him will demoralize the rest of the Ssi-ruuvi invasion force."
"We have to get to him first," Tyria grimaced, jerking her head away as a paddle-beamer beam sliced into the column behind her. "And these Ssi-ruuk aren't going to make it easy."
Lwothin let out a warbling reply, and the translation droid gasped. "Oh dear, Lwothin is suggesting that you use the P'w'eck as a distraction and flank the Keeramak."

"Lwothin, your people would be overwhelmed almost immediately," Tyria said in protest. "We're barely holding the line as it is."
"Lwothin acknowledges the risk, but he says that the P'w'eck are willing to risk everything to be free of the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium once and for all. He does advise that you be quick about it, however. He would like to see the freedom he and his people are fighting for."
Tyria closed her eyes, pained, as she nodded. "Then may the Force be with you, Lwothin."
As the P'w'eck soldiers defending the capital building collapsed the defensive line to make it more compact and concentrated, Tyria led the Bakuran defenders back into the building and out through a side door. They hurriedly passed through several alleys and side-streets to flank the Ssi-ruuvi force. The sound of battle from the capital began to rise in pitch as the Ssi-ruuk took the moment to press their attack with everything they had. Tyria had no doubt that the P'w'eck soldiers were falling, and used the Force to add even more urgency into the steps of the soldiers following her.
The defenders burst back out into the main street, behind the Keeramak and his personal bodyguard. The Ssi-ruuvi leader seemed surprise to see this new force and let out a bellowing roar in challenge. Immediately, several Ssi-ruuvi triangle fighters flew into flanking positions around the multi-colored Ssi-ruu. Tyria and the Bakuran defenders looked up at them fearfully while the Keeramak appeared to smirk in victory—just before the fighters opened up on his own people and began a massacre of the Ssi-ruuvi ground forces.
"Open fire!" Tyria barked in order, to shake the shock from the Bakuran defenders.
At once, the laser fire recommenced, picking off the completely stunned Ssi-ruuvi attack force. From the opposite side, the P'w'eck soldiers pressed their attack back out from the capital building, advancing past a line of dead and towards the Keeramak's position. The multi-colored leader fired his own paddle-beamers , one in each hand, at the P'w'eck; obviously enraged by their betrayal. Several P'w'eck fell, but the rest continued to push forward.
Finally, a paddle-beamer strike fired by Lwothin hit the Keeramak cleanly in the leader's head. The Keeramak shuddered and fell to one knee. Lwothin approached the Ssi-ruuvi leader, pressed the nozzle of his paddle-beamer to the Keeramak's head, and pulled the trigger. The Fourth Battle for Bakura was over.

)-(III)-(

Sitting in orbit around the planet Onadax, the lone pilot of the *Dancing Droid*, tilted her head as she looked at the video feed on the display in

front of her. After analyzing the remains of the Human Replica Droids produced by ODT, she had managed to reconstruct much of the source code and discovered the frequency and code one could use to gain access to any HRD operating systems. Though she had been confident that she had destroyed all the HRD's when she took out the factory, she just had to be sure.

She was glad she double-checked. If the feed she was viewing was anything to go by, there was at least one more HRD still operational. The HRD probably wasn't even aware that its optical sensors had been hacked from several light-years away. Using hyper-comm buoys and the knowledge she had learned from the ODT factory, the pilot of the *Dancing Droid* had full access to everything this particular droid was seeing and hearing.

"I gave you Bakura, and now I expect to be paid as promised. Half the money I shelled out for this body. It is not my fault the Galactic Alliance had ships nearby that forced you to accelerate your plans."

"You stink of the same filth that your kind drowns in. Bakura is still not in our possession. There is no deal."

"You can't go back on our deal like this. I'm not leaving without the credits. All you have to do is send another force to destroy both Bakura and the P'w'eck. It's not that hard considering the damage the first fleet inflicted upon them."

"I grow tired of listening to your voice. We gave you your body for a specific reason. It is <u>you</u> who have failed to uphold your end of the bargain. Not us."

"See here, General E'thinna! I..."

"Unless you wish to fight me for your money, we have nothing more to discuss."

"I will fight you, and I will crush you like an insect."

The general's mocking laugh filled the droid's audio receptors.

"I'm serious! Give me my money!"

"The only thing you shall get from me is death."

The pilot of the *Dancing Droid* raised her eyebrows as the system information she was receiving indicated that a restraining bolt had been activated.

"You are a fool, human," the general hissed, stepping forward and peering into the droid's eyes. "Did you honestly think that we wouldn't be ready for you? Do you believe us to be so stupid? We have learned much of your vile machines since coming to your galaxy..."

The pilot began recording the transmission at that line, knowing that something wasn't quite right.

"...You sowed chaos; now we shall reap the rewards."

The pilot gasped aloud as the alien's hideous face melted away. The long snout folded back and rolled down the long neck, taking the triple-lidded eyes and scent-tongues with them.
Beneath the ooglith masquer, the *Dancing Droid*'s occupant easily recognized the purple-skinned, scarred visage of a Yuuzhan Vong. There was no mistaking the member of the race that hated everything mechanical. The *Dancing Droid*'s pilot let out a sad sigh as the Yuuzhan Vong allowed more of his kind to enter the room. His lackeys began pounding the droid to pieces with their amphistaff. The last thing the droid saw was the Yuuzhan Vong posing as General E'thinna, walking away.
The pilot turned off the feed, saved everything to a data file, and then sent it all off to her contacts in Galactic Alliance Intelligence. She doubted any would care about the passing of the HRD known to many as Cundertol, but at least the Galactic Alliance Intelligence would learn about the Yuuzhan Vong who had infiltrated the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium. With her job done, she sent a 'thanks for the fun times, we should do it again,' note to Tyria, and maneuvered her ship out of orbit. With one last glance back at Onadax, the *Dancing Droid* leapt to hyperspace and to its next droid-filled adventure.

)-(IV)-(

It was indeed a new era for Bakura. Perhaps not the one envisioned by Cundertol, Harris, or Malinza, but a new era nonetheless. General Panib had proved very adept at keeping his people united despite the treachery of their leaders, and was all for including the Freedom into a new coalition government. This government also included the P'w'eck, now free of their masters, and it looked as if Bakura would indeed remain strong and prosperous for quite some time.
A referendum was held, and in light of the recent events, the people of Bakura chose to give the Galactic Alliance one more chance. They remained a part of the Galactic Alliance, but only just. Both General Farlander and Tyria had agreed to terms that gave Bakura more autonomy and more of a say in the way their military capabilities were used. No longer would the Galactic Alliance be able to just requisition ships from Bakura without giving anything back. Additionally, as a show of good faith, the *Mon Adapyne* would remain on hand for the near future. The P'w'eck were likewise welcomed into the Galactic Alliance and for the first time in a long while, the Balance appeared to have been restored on the fringe planet known as Bakura.
As the *Kell Dragon* lifted off of Bakura, Tyria smiled tenderly at the scene before her. She had left the cockpit to check on her son, and found both he and Sannah curled up together in one of the bunks.

They were both sleeping peacefully, the events of the past few weeks finally catching up to them. That, and the realization that they had come so close to being enteched, had caused the two of them to once more reinforce the bond they shared. Tyria tucked a strand of hair behind her ears as she silently entered the room. She pulled the blankets back up around her son and Sannah, tucking them in securely, before giving both a brief kiss on their foreheads. With one last gentle smile, she dimmed the lights and left the room.
Returning to the cockpit and in need of some unwinding herself, she let out a deep breath and activated the hyper-comm emitter.
Her eyes sparkled happily as the holo-graphic image of her husband appeared.
"Hey Kell."
"*Tyria,"* Kell's grin was child-like upon seeing her. *"Another fun adventure?"*
"Remind me not to go anywhere again just because the Force tells me too," Tyria said with a mock nod of sadness. "Are you doing okay?"
"*Just fine. The Wraiths are helping Antilles hold Kuat at the moment. Care to join?"*
"For a couple of days, maybe," Tyria nodded.
"*Really?"* Kell said brightly. *"I'll have a full banquet ready for you and Doran, then. The best military rations the quartermaster will give me."*
Tyria chuckled at his antics and reached to his hologram fondly.
"That'd be great."
"*So it really was some adventure,"* Kell raised an eyebrow as his expression softened. He may not have been Force sensitive, but he didn't have to be to read his wife's tired expression. *"You and Doran all right?"*
"We're fine. Sannah is too," Tyria sighed. "Bakura was a bit more of an adventure than we thought it would be."
"*Bakura?"* Both of Kell's eyebrows shot up. *"Now this is an adventure I have to hear."*
Tyria leaned back into the pilot's chair, smiling as she began to recount her latest adventure. Once more, she was thankful of the Force for giving her her son, her wonderfully dorky husband, and everything she would ever need.
)-(V)-(
Commander Shith'rii Choka sat back in his new Hutt-skin chair, finding it suitable enough. Placed in charge of all of Domain Choka's forces since the promotion of Nas Choka, Shith'rii knew that he had a large void to fill. It was why he was more than eager to teach these disgusting Hutts a lesson. They dare plot with the Jedi against the

Yuuzhan Vong? How forgetful they were, to not remember what happened the last time they challenged the Yuuzhan Vong. He would finish what Nas Choka had started and annihilate the Hutts once and for all. It would a moment the people and the galaxy would recall and shudder in fear of.

From the numbers recited to him by the Hutt whose skin covered his chair, Shith'rii Choka knew that his own fleet outnumbered that of the infidels' many times over. Knew that it would be he, Shith'rii Choka, who would bring honor to Domain Choka, for the defeat of the Hutts and the capture of Jaina and Anakin Solo. With the Domains of Lah and Karsh currently disgraced, it was time for the Domain of Choka to rise above them all.

It would be a quick and decisive battle. His opponent would cower with fear at the might of the Yuuzhan Vong. Shith'rii would prove to Nas Choka and Shimrra that they were not wrong to entrust this region of space to him. They would drop out of hyperspace directly in the gravity well of the planet called Tatooine. With such overwhelming force, a planetary bombardment would soon commence after they swept aside the pitiful fleet thrown at them by the infidels. No amount of strategy or tactics would save them. Shith'rii had even delayed a retaliatory attack to ensure that he had as many ships with him as possible.

In addition to Domain Choka's vessels, the lesser domains, such as that of Rak and Qat added to the might of his fleet. Two yammosks were in attendance for the battle. Victory was all but certain.

"Real space reversion in three, two, one."

As the officer counted down, Shith'rii Choka sat on the edge of his seat. The cognition hood he wore allowed him to clearly see everything his ship could see. He was more than eager to see the panic his armada would cause among the infidel ships. Watching them flee before his might.

Unfortunately for Shith'rii Choka, that wasn't the sight that greeted him. No sooner had his fleet dropped out of hyperspace than hundreds of missiles slammed into the unprepared vessels. It was as if the infidels had known exactly where and when they would arrive and had fired the missiles ahead of time. Fire blossomed as the lead ships disintegrated under the barrage of missiles. The other vessels were frantically veering away from the onslaught as the warheads continued to detonate amongst the fleet on all sides.

This wasn't what Shith'rii Choka had expected.

"Reform the lines! Have the fleet regroup around…"

"Great One, the yammosks have been slain!" An officer cried out in panic.

"What?! Already? How?"
"Unknown!"
"The left flank of our formation is collapsing! Ten infidel capital ships have destroyed the *Creeping Death*!"
"Our right flank cannot hold much longer! Another fifteen enemy ships have punched through the line!"
Shith'rii Choka's head was jerking back and forth as a slew of reports came in, none of them positive. He glanced towards the blaze-bug niche and saw the ships in his fleet blink out one by one. It also showed that the enemy ships had surround them on all sides. Once again proving that they had known exactly where his fleet would drop out of orbit. He opened his mouth, but he had no answer to the panicked cries of his subordinates. Everything was going so wrong.
"It's like they know what we're going to do before we do it!" The villip officer wailed. "Yun-Harla is truly on their side!"
"Five more infidel ships are attacking the rear of our formation!"
"We have confirmed reports that Jaina Solo is in the battle. She is commanding the *Ksstarr* and being escorted by a squadron of their fighters."
That announcement seemed to get Shith'rii's attention. "Where!"
"She is with the group of six infidel vessels meeting our fleet head on!" The officer said in bewilderment.
"Prepare to engage the…" Shith'rii's orders were cut off as his ship shook violently.
"Great One! One of their triangle ships, and one of their oval ones they call Mon Calamari Cruiser have trapped us between them! Dovin basals are being overloaded!"
"The *Ksstarr* is lining up for an attack run!"
Shith'rii froze in complete panic, his mind shutting down at the impossibility of this situation. This was supposed to have been Domain Choka's moment of glory. *His* moment to show the galaxy what happens if the Yuuzhan Vong were defied. It just wasn't possible. It just wasn't fair.
From the cognition hood on his head, he could see the lone Yuuzhan Vong frigate being commanded by Jaina Solo line up to the bridge of his own vessel. Explosions were already ripping his ship apart. This was just the final insult. His hands fell slack to his side as the *Ksstarr's* weaponry opened up. Plasma projectiles ripped through the overloaded defenses of his ship and plowed into the bridge.
In the next instant, Shith'rii Choka felt a blinding surge of heat and then he felt nothing more.
)-(VI)-(

"The command ship is down!" Jaina reported to the rest of the fleet through the comlink. They had had four days to prepare for the Yuuzhan Vong attack, and things were going pretty much according to plan.

With the yammosk and command ships down, it was time to finish the battle.

Jaina nodded to Rashak, the *Trickster*'s villip operator, and he nodded in turn, letting Jaina know that all Yuuzhan Vong vessels in the region could now hear her. "Fleet that formerly belonged to Shith'rii Choka. This is Jaina Solo, the Goddess Yun-Harla incarnate. Your yammosks are dead, your commander is dead. Your lines have been shattered, and I am preventing all of you from jumping into hyperspace by my will alone."

Technically, it was her will augmented by General Antilles' Interdictor cruiser and Tatooine's natural gravity well, but in their panicked state, Jaina didn't think they needed to know that.

"You will all surrender to me or join Shith'rii Choka in disgrace. Dying here will not grant you any honor. The gods have already turned away from you for following a commander as blind as he. As are well aware by now, I was ready for Choka and all of you. I knew your every movement and strategy the moment it came to your minds."

This time Anakin got credit for the all-knowing part of her powers, and Jacen was the one who alerted them to the arrival of the incoming fleet, but she was Yun-Harla, and tricking people was her specialty.

"You can fight and die in vain, or surrender to Yun-Harla and maintain your honor. There is no disgrace in living. There is always another option besides death. It takes a true warrior to see this. Your fate is in your hands."

Jaina made a 'kill' motion with her hand, and Rashak let the villip relax to its natural state. "Well, what do you think?"

A few moments of silence passed as everyone in the bridge watched the blaze-bug niche. Finally, Liir, the operator of the niche, spoke up, awe in her voice. "I think that you must truly be an avatar of Yun-Harla. The ships of Domain Rak are standing down."

"Domain Qat's ships are also broadcasting their submission to Yun-Harla," Rashak announced.

"Some of Domain Choka's ships are trying to regroup, but others have become stationary."

Jaina sighed. "Well, it was too much to hope that all of them would just give in. Let the Bothans have them. Hopefully it'll make up for the ones they won't be able to kill."

Rashak nodded. "As you command, goddess."

Several more seconds passed as the cluster of Domain Choka ships on the blaze-bug niche flickered out one by one. Guided by Anakin's Vongsense-enhanced battlemeld, the last hold-outs never stood a chance against the blood-thirsty Bothan fleet.
"What a waste," Liir whispered sadly. With every ship destroyed, not only were warriors killed, but so were hundreds of Shamed Ones who didn't even know what freedom felt like. Shamed Ones who had been beaten into submission and forced to obey the warriors and priests simply because it was what their religion commanded them to do.
"Yeah," Jaina remarked, walking over and placing a reassuring hand on the Freed One's shoulder. "But at least the others surrendered."
"There is that," Liir acknowledged.
"Goddess, seven more Yuuzhan Vong vessels with markings matching Domain Choka have just dropped out of hyperspace at the outer edge of the system," the pilot Falhar warned sharply. "Three Uro-ik V'alh, two Miid Ro'ik, a Suuv Ban D'krid, and a Matalok."
Jaina swore. "Tell the Hapan fleet to…"
"Receiving open communication from the Matalok, identifying itself as the… *Blessed by the Jeedai?*" Rashak sounded completely bewildered.
Jaina blinked in surprise. "By all means, put them on."
"This is Taan, commander of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong vessel, Blessed by the Jeedai. Please hold your fire, we came to help."
Jaina felt her surprise and happiness echoed by the other Jedi in the meld. "Taan? As in Tahiri and Anakin's Taan?"
"Yes, Yun-Harla. It is I." Taan sounded amused by the shock in Jaina's voice. *"We came to reinforce you and the others, but apparently we were not needed. Either the Jedi are greater than even I could believe or Shith'rii Choka was more incompetent than I thought."*
"Probably more of the latter, a little of the former," Jaina laughed. "How'd you get your own fleet?"
"Shith'rii Choka used Ylesia to house some of the fleet he kept in reserve. After that it was only a matter of time before the Freed Ones on Ylesia joined up with the Shamed Ones he had brought in. Since we all serve the warriors food…well…let's just say I know a priest of Yun-Harla who is an expert at making poisons. Our ships are only crewed by the minimum number of Yuuzhan Vong possible, though some of the slaves from Ylesia are also helping out. We didn't think we'd get here in time."
"It's the thought that counts, Taan," Jaina chuckled, unable to keep the smile off her face. "Feel free to join us. The rest of Choka's fleet surrendered to me, so right now it's just a matter of sorting through the prisoners. I'm sure Tahiri and Anakin would love to see you too."

"As you command, Yun-Harla. I would also like to inform you that the Hutt Underground has taken the planet you have called 'Runaway Prince,' and the Yuuzhan Vong equivalent of your shipyard there has been put out of commission."

Jaina shook her head, and knew she was grinning like a fool as she settled back into the command chair. Things couldn't get any better.

)-(VI)-(

Information provided by Taan and her confederates painted a pretty clear picture as to the situation in Hutt Space. Shith'rii Choka had more or less emptied it of all but a few Yuuzhan Vong vessels in his disastrous strike on Tatooine. With the loss of the ships at Ylesia, and those protecting the Runaway Prince's yorik coral production facility, only a handful of ships were left guarding a Kor Chokka grand cruiser in orbit around Nal Hutta. When asked about any Barabel captives, Taan confirmed that several shipments from Barab I had come in and that the slaves were being used to mine in the now toxic atmosphere on the planet's surface.

Saba Sebatyne had hissed at this, and thumped her tail anxiously; her desire to rescue her people echoing throughout the meld that the Jedi still maintained.

There were still some details to iron out before entering Hutt Space, however. Namely, the surprising number of Yuuzhan Vong who had surrendered.

Surrendered to Jaina specifically.

Apparently Anakin's advanced Vongsense-enhanced battlemeld had scared the warriors half to death, making it seem as if Jaina really had known what they were thinking and what they were going to do. When faced with such obvious impossible odds, even the most veteran of Yuuzhan Vong warriors knew when to give up.

Most of the logistics surrounding the captured Yuuzhan Vong ships and warriors were being sorted out by Jaina, Tahiri, and Taan in orbit around Tatooine. In the meantime, back on the planet's surface, Anakin, Jacen, and Corran were going over what was needed to take out the Yuuzhan Vong battle station. The last time the Galactic Alliance had gone up against one was over Obroa-skai. But that was with an armada of several hundred vessels and trickery on Jaina's part. Even with a small escort, the Kor Chokk grand cruiser was more than enough to repel the force at their disposal. Yet, they were in agreement that a lightning fast strike while the Yuuzhan Vong were cut off was needed.

"We can use some of the captured ships and board the grand cruiser," Anakin suggested. "We let the commander of the cruiser know that

Shith'rii was slain in battle and that command of Hutt Space now falls to him. He'll most likely want to execute us personally for abandoning Shith'rii, so any ships that approach will be ordered to dock."
"We'll have to keep the number pretty low, though, otherwise we'll attract suspicion," Corran said. "One or two ships running away won't be that surprising. But if a third of the fleet that went out, came back, the commander might become wary."
"We'll just have to fit as many people into the ships as possible," Anakin said. "If my understanding about the Yuuzhan Vong is correct, the commander of the grand cruiser will expect the crews to obediently submit themselves to execution."
"That sounds right," Jacen agreed. "Security will probably be low, so overpowering any guards awaiting the boarding party shouldn't take long. But the boarding party has to take control of the station fast. Any sign that he's losing control of the situation, and the commander of the Kor Chokk will probably kill all the slaves and bombard Nal Hutta again. Yuuzhan Vong aren't very good losers. Especially the commanders."
Corran nodded grimly. "We'll need to have Freed Ones who know the layout of a Kor Chokk be part of the boarding party then. The last thing we want is for the boarding party to be running around in circles looking for the control room and ending up in a Vong refresher."
"So we have Taan and her people lead the boarding party," Anakin said. "As Yuuzhan Vong, they'll attract the least suspicion if they're seen running through the hallways. If it comes to it, any Jedi or Galactic Alliance soldier who goes with the Freed Ones can play the role of prisoner."
"Ah, yes. The old 'we're helpless prisoners so take us to your leader' routine," Corran said dryly.
"Again, that's only the backup plan. If it does come to it, hopefully it'll work out better than it did on the Myrkr mission," Anakin winced.
Corran smiled faintly. "So who should go with the Freed Ones, then?"
"Tahiri definitely. On top of knowing Yuuzhan Vong, she can also use Vongsense," Jacen said, looking to his brother for approval; she was, after all, Anakin's girlfriend.
"Tahiri," Anakin agreed. "Kyp too."
"Kyp? Are you sure?" Jacen said, sounding surprised.
"He's good at thinking on his feet if something should go wrong," Anakin nodded. "I'll be outside maintaining the Vongsense within the meld so he's the best choice."
"Then I'll go with the boarding party," Jacen said.
"Okay," Anakin said. "So Tahiri, Kyp, you, and Alema."
"Alema?" This time it was Corran's turn to be surprised.

"She has Vongsense too," Anakin said. "And she's better at close-quarters combat than actually flying a starfighter."
"Okay, so us four and what? A dozen or so commandos?" Jacen said, looking to Colonel Nek Bwua'tu and the other members at the table.
"Whatever you think is best, Jedi Solo," the colonel inclined his head, and then motioned to the representatives of the other fleet elements. "After the success of the space battle, I don't think any of us will doubt your planning abilities."
"Indeed," the admiral of the Bothan fleet harrumphed. "Never before have I been in a battle that was so successful as the one we just fought. Everything surpassed even my high expectations."
"You have my ships," Colonel Kadra Bres, of General Iblis' taskforce shrugged. "We've been ordered to stay on until you have no need for us."
"Hapes has its word to the Hutts to uphold," Tenel Ka likewise added in support. "The fact that we suffered only several fighter loses but no pilot deaths in the past engagement is only a welcomed bonus."
"Why don't we have a mixed commando unit, then," Anakin said. "We'll take the best people from each group and merge them into one unit. Make this a united effort."
"Good idea," Jacen said. "A mixed unit will also make it harder for the Yuuzhan Vong to predict what the group will do."
"This is one of those diplomatic things, isn't it?" Wes Janson sighed. "I told Wedge he should have sent someone else."
Jacen and Anakin exchanged wry grins that was all Solo. Neither particularly liked diplomatic maneuverings either, but some of their mother's abilities had rubbed off on them as they were growing up. As Wes had mentioned earlier, there really hadn't been a combined fleet of so many different independent groups in a long time. If Jacen and Anakin were going to help ensure the Galactic Alliance got off to a good start, they needed to actually make this an allied effort and not just have individual groups do their own separate thing.
"Colonel Bres, Colonel Bwua'tu, can we leave it to the two of you to create the joint commando unit?" Jacen asked. "I know mashing together these kinds of groups out of the blue isn't the best, so whoever you pick will have to learn how to get along on the trip over to Hutt Space."
"It won't be a problem."
"We'll get right on it, Jedi Solo." Both Colonels saluted, and then they excused themselves.
Anakin looked to the Bothan admiral. "Sir, we'll most likely need your ships on standby if things go disastrously wrong."

"You can count on the Bothans," the admiral nodded.
"Then can you and Colonel Janson make contingency plans just in case, say, a second Yuuzhan Vong battle fleet drops out of hyperspace while we're taking the grand cruiser?" Anakin asked.
"Strategy, that's a language I can understand," Wes looked relieved as both he and the Bothan admiral exchanged serious nods and likewise excused themselves.
That left only Corran, Tenel Ka, Jacen, and Anakin in the room.
"What exactly did you need me here for again?" Corran said dryly. "The two of you did absolutely fine by yourselves."
"We weren't sure how the others would take to being ordered around by kids half their age," Anakin said with a weak smile. "Even with the victory over Shith'rii Choka, they still might have preferred to hear their orders from an older Jedi."
Corran regarded Anakin with a surprised look. He was relieved that all the whispers about Anakin being the next Grandmaster hadn't gone to the kid's head. He was again also reminded that despite his command presence and loyalty he instilled, Anakin was still just that, a kid.
Corran let out a small chuckle. "Anakin, with the success you just had, most of the people in the fleets above Tatooine at the moment would probably follow you all the way to Coruscant if you decided to go there. You too, Jacen. I heard some of what Master Skywalker said to the two of you during your knighting ceremony, and I have to say that I'm surprised, but pleased, at how well the two of you have adopted your roles."
"We are too," Jacen said. "But it's easier knowing that Jaina and Anakin have my back."
"Alone, holding up the entire Jedi Order might have been just a bit too much," Anakin said, inclining his head towards his brother. "Now come on, Jedi Knight Horn, I sense that the Queen Mother has some less than Queen Mother things to say to my brother after he volunteered to be on the strike team."
Jacen glanced back toward Tenel Ka, who simply arched a single eyebrow. "Your senses serve you well, Anakin."
"Thanks, Your Majesty," Anakin said brightly, rising and walking out with Corran. "See you later, Jace."
"Anakin," Jacen said with a half-hearted wave.
The door slid shut behind Anakin and Corran. The moment it did, Tenel Ka rose from her position on the opposite side of the table and moved to a seat next to Jacen. They sat side by side, staring off at the motes of dust that drifted through a ray of light coming from a small window.

"You will be careful, of course," Tenel Ka said evenly. The comparison of the plan to the mission to Myrkr didn't sit well with her stomach. Tenel Ka had no desire to have *any* aspect of that mission play out once again.
"Of course," Jacen agreed.
"We will be most displeased if you were to be harmed in any way."
"And it would be foolish of me to upset the leader of sixty-three systems," Jacen agreed again, his brown eyes still following the drifting motes of dust before him.
"*I* fully expect you to return. No running off after strange creatures or chasing ancient Jedi on some mystic quest."
"I don't expect to find any on the Kor Chokk, but I won't chase any if I do," Jacen said reassuringly.
Sensing Anakin erect a bubble of privacy around the room, both Jacen and Tenel Ka looked to each other in unison. Any pretense vanishing in the safety they had been granted. Grey eyes held Jacen's gaze solemnly. "Return to me, Jacen Solo."
Jacen nodded once. He lifted a hand to cup Tenel Ka's cheek and leaned in for a gentle kiss. "Always, Tenel Ka."
They blinked as they parted, their Force bond allowing for an influx of emotion to bounce between the two of them. Tenel Ka covered the hand he left on the table with her own, visibly swallowing. Finally she looked away and let her hand fall to her side. Anakin gave a mental warning that her attendants were returning for her.
Jacen allowed a ghost of his father's smile as he stood and bowed formally. "Be well, Your Highness."
Tenel Ka inclined her head as the door to the room slid back open. "You as well, Jedi Solo. The Hapan fleet will be the first responders if the Yuuzhan Vong do not fall for this ploy."
"You have my thanks," Jacen straightened, Tenel Ka's small retinue of followers had now caught up with and were flanking her. "Until next time, Queen Mother."
Tenel Ka made a dismissing motion with her hand, and Jacen walked out of the room. As he did, he caught her faint whisper of, "Next time, Jacen, my dear friend."

)-(VII)-(

A week later

Seated on the bridge of the Hapan ship, the *Rock Dragon*, Anakin maintained his careful balance between Vongsense and the Force. Since Ebaq 9 he had been able to refine it, lengthen the duration he could use it. Though the only reason why he had begun to bleed through his nose during the battle of Ebaq 9 had been because the

Ralroost had taken a direct hit that had bounced his face off the nearby bulkhead, he had been reaching his limit anyways. Now, however, he could more or less double that length. It all depended on how he focused and used the Force energy of the others while maintaining his Vongsense. A very fine balance was needed between the two. Leaning just a little too much in one direction would quickly drain his energy reserves.

They'll be okay, Tenel Ka. Anakin sent through the meld, sensing the Hapan Queen Mother's thoughts. *He has Alema and Tahiri looking out for him, and Kyp looking out for all of them.*

Tenel Ka kept her gaze on the viewport of the bridge, giving no sign that she had heard him. She was currently focused on the mixed Hapan/Galactic Alliance fleet that was under her command. They were on the very edge of the Y'Toub system, home of Nal Hutta and the last of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet guarding the region.

"Bait One and Two have docked with the Yuuzhan Vong station," the helmsman reported. "Last report indicates that everything is going according to plan."

"Bel Iblis task group reporting exit vector is still clear."

As the situational updates continued to come in, Anakin stretched out and concentrated his enhanced Vongsense for the four Jedi in the strike team. For Alema, Tahiri, and Jacen, practitioners of Vongsense, all Anakin did was sharpen their own senses and make it so that they could keep in touch with both the Force and their Vongsense at the same time. Through the meld, Kyp was able to see both what the other three Jedi were sensing, but also what Anakin was laying out for him; a mental road map of the surrounding areas complete with glittering signs that announced the location of a Yuuzhan Vong.

I made it so that even you could understand it, Master. Anakin sent innocently.

Trying to capture a Vong battle station here, do you mind, Jedi Knight Solo? Kyp shot back.

Boys, play nice. Jaina added from her position onboard the *Trickster.*

The banter fell away as the strike force began engaging the patrols within the Kor Chokk grand cruiser. Taan's regiment of Freed Ones split up, each taking with them a portion of the joint commando unit that accompanied the Jedi. Tahiri and Jacen headed for the bridge, while Alema and Kyp headed for the dovin basal clusters. Everything continued to go as planned.

Tenel Ka was relieved in some way to have access to the Force, as she knew that she would have been otherwise worrying herself crazy waiting for some word from the infiltration team. The teams had gone

dark to keep from giving away their position, and only those within the battlemeld knew what was happening. It was all up to the infiltration teams now, for better or for worse.

)-(VIII)-(

Working with Jacen was different than working with Anakin, Tahiri decided as they headed down one of the long corridors within the Kor Chokk. Though she had worked with Jacen before via the battlemeld, physically working with him, side-by-side, was a unique experience. Whereas Jaina's aura was similar to Anakin's, Jacen's couldn't have been more dissimilar, almost the complete opposite.

On one hand, Anakin tended to keep his own thoughts and feelings tightly controlled, whether in the meld or working side-by-side. On the other, Jacen continued to project an aura of calm and control, keeping the negative effects of tunnel vision and the adrenaline rush that might come from embarking on such a high-risk mission to a bare minimum. Like Master Skywalker had said, Jacen was the pillar of mental discipline for the order. With Anakin, you tended to emotionally attach yourself to the mission, wanting to see it through to the end no matter what. You felt that you had a job to do, a duty to your friends and family. It was that emotional connection that made so many people want to follow him.

With Jacen, though, you *knew* that you had a mission to complete. A goal was put forth and you tried to accomplish it as best you could. You *knew* what would happen if you succeeded. Just as you knew about the alternatives should you fail. He was the epitome of the 'do or do not' maxim, logical and precise. It was almost as if Jacen could detach himself from the emotional aspect of the mission and concentrate solely on completing the mission; just as he had done on Myrkr when he had left Anakin and her to chase after the voxyn queen.

As accustomed as she had become to working alongside Anakin, having her head oddly clear of the emotional stress Anakin normally took on—and unsuccessfully tried to hide from her—during the course of the mission was something she wasn't used to. In fact, in the oddly calm and clear-headed state she found herself in, she almost missed that emotional overflow.

She glanced at Jacen out of the corner of her eyes as they followed Taan and several Freed Ones to the control clusters that regulated most of the Kor Chokk. He had a face very similar to Anakin's, except for the eyes. Jacen and Jaina shared the same shade of brown, while Anakin had inherited piercing blue. It was just one more thing that set Anakin apart from his powerful Force sensitive siblings.

"Credit for your thoughts?" Jacen whispered, using the Force to keep the sound of his voice contained.
Tahiri blushed. "Just thinking about how different you are from Anakin."
"Good different, or bad different?"
"Different, different," Tahiri said.
They paused for a bit as they both sensed a Yuuzhan Vong warrior about to open a membrane door right next to them. Jacen activated his lightsaber and the blade cut through the membrane door and into the unsuspecting warrior. The warrior slumped to the ground without a sound, and they continued their trek.
"Different, different?"
"Uh huh," Tahiri nodded. "The both of you are so powerful, it's almost scary. You both have different ways of approaching problems with the different powers you have. And at the same time, you each control your power so differently. It's all so…"
"Different?" Jacen said with a smile.
"Yeah," Tahiri grinned back. "The way you and Anakin think about the Force is similar, but you both use it in your own ways. You're more of a 'what-will-happen-in-the-future-if-I-do-this' kind of guy. Anakin's a 'let's-see-what-happens-in-the-future-*when*-I-do-this.'"
"There's a difference?"
"Yup. You tend to try and predict the future by altering what you would do to get the results you want; *before* anything actually takes place. Anakin sets pieces in motion *and then* tries to redirect the events to a desired outcome as the events come along. He takes a more spontaneous approach. You don't act until you have as many variables that you can think of, accounted for. Neither are bad and both produce good results, but they don't exactly fit together well. Take this mission for example. We started off on Barab I, took a side-trip to Tatooine, baited a Yuuzhan Vong commander to come out to Tatooine, and now we're invading a Kor Chokk in Hutt Space. There's no way anyone could have planned all this in advance. Anakin takes what comes and changes his overall plans to fit the situation."
Another break as they felt a patrol of Yuuzhan Vong coming down an opposite corridor. They both motioned to the commandos and Freed Ones, and they all ducked into a side room. As the patrol passed their location, they attacked, efficiently taking down the patrol before any alarm could be uttered.
"Where was I?" Tahiri said sheepishly as she snapped her amphistaff back around her wrist.
"Anakin changing his overall plan," Jacen reminded with an amused smile. He now knew what his brother meant when he had said that

Tahiri could talk non-stop and that it was nearly impossible to get a word in.
"Right. Though Anakin's good at overall planning, you're better at these individual pieces. Anakin sets a big goal, like taking out the voxyn queen or retaking Hutt Space, and he can plan basic steps to get to that goal. But in between those steps is where you're better. Like this Kor Chokk. Anakin's basic goal was for us to get on the station and take it out. You and Master Horn worked out the finer details on *how* we were going to do that. Just like when you worked out on Myrkr how you were going to track the voxyn queen after everything began to fall apart. He motivates people into wanting to do the mission, you show the people *how exactly* they can complete the mission. The two of you are so different, yet you make the perfect team if your plans sync up."
"It doesn't always feel that way, but I know what you mean," Jacen said. "Despite all the disagreements I have with him, he *is* my little brother. I'm proud of what he's been able to accomplish, especially with everyone placing so much pressure on his shoulders. I'm still a little jealous, I can't help but feel that. But I'm most definitely proud."
"You ever tell him that?" Tahiri tilted her head to look up at Jacen curiously.
"He knows," Jacen shrugged. "I think."
Tahiri let out an exasperated breath and shook her head in disbelief. "Really, Jacen?"
Welcome to my world, Jaina sent through the Force, more or less mimicking Tahiri's reaction.
"He's my brother. He should already know that I'm proud of him," Jacen said in his own defense.
"He's not a mind reader, Jacen," Tahiri groaned, realizing that that phrase wasn't the most apt for inter-personal relationships among Jedi. Eyes darting to the side, she whipped her amphistaff out and it bit into a warrior's throat just as he tried to charge around the corner. "He respects you too much to try to pry how you feel about him from your mind. It won't hurt to tell him." She said as the warrior gurgled and collapsed to the ground behind them. "Despite everything, he still looks up to you. A part of the reason why he's been able to do all the things he has is because he measures himself up to you and Jaina. On top of being named after your grandfather, he has to follow in yours and Jaina's footsteps, and somehow save this galaxy. Tall order for an eighteen year old, don't you think?"
"Alright, alright," Jacen sighed. "When we retake Nal Hutta, I'll sit down and have a word with him."

"You do that. And if that dummy of mine tries to be stubborn, let me know."
Jacen regarded her with sparkling brown eyes. "You definitely fit right in with us Solos. Stubborn, smart, and someone I'd be happy to have as a little sister any day."
Tahiri blushed again and looked away. "Hey, if you guys are my family. I want it as complete and as whole as possible, and that means you and Anakin making up for good. You know, like those times in the holovids Jaina gave me."
Jacen fondly patted her shoulder. "Hey, no matter what happens, he's still my little brother. And Jaina will always be my twin sister. We'll always be family and I doubt anything or anyone will ever be strong enough to tear us apart."
)-(IX)-(
Everyone on the bridge let out a breath as the infiltration teams reported in.
"This is Team One, dovin basals have been scuttled." Kyp reported.
"Team Two, here. We have control of the bridge. The commander is dead." Jacen announced over the comm-channel.
Tenel Ka wasted little time in authorizing the strike. "All ships in Task Force One, engage,"
A micro-jump later, and the Hapan and Galactic Alliance vessels pounced on the startled Yuuzhan Vong defenders.
After several of the Yuuzhan Vong ships were sent spiraling down into Nal Hutta, a yammosk vessel included, Jaina once again gave out an opportunity for the Yuuzhan Vong to surrender. Tahiri and Taan, now in the cognition hoods of the massive Yuuzhan Vong behemoth, used the Kor Chokk's weapons against the remaining Yuuzhan Vong ships; an emphasis that their greatest ship was no longer on their side. What sealed the deal was when the ships captured from Shith'rii Choka's fleet jumped in in support of the infidel vessels.
Though some struggles took place aboard a couple of the vessels, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet stood down without any further urging.
"Congratulations Anakin, Jaina, Jacen," Corran deadpanned over the comm-line. *"You've successfully retaken Hutt Space in the span of a single month; something a concerted New Republic effort hasn't been able to do for two years. Unfortunately, your shore-leave has run out and it's now time for you to <u>actually</u> report for duty. Force help us all."*
Anakin pulled himself out of Vongsense with great relief. "Let's get the Barabels and tell the Hutts they can have their planet back first. But other than that, this break's definitely been fun."
)-(X)-(

High Priest Naazar of the god Yun-Yammka, sat in the audience chamber of Shimrra, listening to the warrior caste give reports as to the state of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Ebaq 9 had been costly. The current commander sieging Kuat had lost nearly thirty percent of his forces and seemed to be no closer to a victory than he had been several weeks ago. B'shith Vorrik's schemes in Imperial Space were proceeding slowly, perhaps too slowly. By the time his plan came to fruition, there might not even be a Yuuzhan Vong Empire left to include the Imperials into. Even the new Warmaster, Nas Choka, appeared infuriated that there were more gains than loses being reported.
To make matters worse, the *pazhkic Yuuzhna'tar al'tirrna,* or World Brain, appeared to have stopped growing just before reaching its full maturity. Its stunted growth had confused and bewildered the shapers, and many had already lost their lives in their failure to explain the dhuryam's sudden mutation. With the World Brain still in its juvenile stage, it was unable to take full control of the thousands of processes needed to completely shape the planet to the specifications of a suitable home-world. Creatures were dying off because it couldn't regulate their growth, the weather was chaotic at times as it tried to compensate for one task by sacrificing another. And to make matters worse, the World Brain appeared to have unleashed a foul-smelling spore into the air of Yuuzhan'tar, which caused painful and embarrassing itching everywhere. Efforts to counteract this had caused seismic activity which brought down the new temple to Yun-Yammka. It was one disaster after another, and even the most faithful were beginning to wonder if the gods had left them.
As Naazar rose to dress down the unfortunate member of the warrior caste, a group of individuals hurried into the room.
"Dread One! Please forgive the interruption!" One wailed, throwing himself down in front of Shimrra.
"Speak," The Supreme Overlord permitted.
"Dread One, Shith'rii Choka's fleet in Hutt Space has been destroyed! The last Kor Chokk to survive the journey through dark space lies in the hands of the heretics, and the yorik coral growing facility within Hutt Space now lies in the hands of the infidels!"
The chamber, which had been filled with murmurs at the interruption, fell deathly quiet as Shimrra rose from his red polyp bed.
"What?"
"Shith'rii Choka was casted down by the combined minds of Jacen, Jaina, and Anakin Solo!" wailed the messenger. "He and much of his fleet are no more. Worse, the remaining fleet have surrendered to Jaina Solo because they see her as Yun-Harla's avatar!"

There was a whip-like motion of Shimrra's arm, and the head of the messenger rolled away from the body. "I will not tolerate anyone who even insinuates such a lie." He looked to the other messengers. "So Hutt Space is no longer under our dominion?"
"No Great One," one of the other messengers spoke.
Shimrra's lips curled back in a snarl. His multi-colored eyes cast about until he spotted Nas Chokka, still standing in preparation to make a comment. "This failure is the responsibility of your Domain. Give me a victory or your life is forfeit."
"Dread One," Nas Choka bowed hastily. "I am your amphistaff, point me and I shall slay your enemies."
"Build up your fleet," Shimrra said. "When I order you, I want the blow to be decisive and crushing. No one else will doubt the Yuuzhan Vong. No more will the defeat of our fleets aid the heretical whispers circling amongst the Shamed Ones. You will break the backbone of the Galactic Alliance by massacring their forces at Kuat. From there, you shall go on and lay waste to their new capital. Let no one survive. Let the worlds burn. Let the names of the gods rise up from the lips of all Yuuzhan Vong!"
"Al' tanna Shimrra knotte Yun'o!"
)-(XI)-(
"Oh yes indeed, madness hath griped the mind of the Supreme Overlord," Onimi crackled in the empty room. Only Naazar had stayed behind once everyone else had left. "But who will dare question him, who will be so bold? Shall he lead us all to our deaths, oh yes he will. Yet we are all blind, mute, and deaf, we follow him still."
"Enough Onimi," Naazar whispered. Though Shimrra had returned to his Worldship, he still felt uneasy about speaking loudly in the meeting room. "Why?"
"Why what?" Onimi seemed to lose his veneer of insanity in an instant.
"Why did you show me what that heretical shaper, Nen Yim, was working on?"
"Would you rather you remain blissfully ignorant, High Priest?"
Naazar clenched his jaw. Onimi had used his title mockingly, and rightly so. If there were no gods, what was he the High Priest of?
"Why?"
"Perhaps you had a glimmer of potential, a brain within that skull of yours," Onimi said in singsong. "Perhaps I was bored and it was simply a jest."
"A jest!" Naazar roared. "You showed me that there is no Eighth Cortex. That everything I believed in was a lie! That the gods are a lie! And it was for a jest?"

Onimi giggled and flitted about in his garments made from the cloth of various New Republic uniforms. "It is funny to me. Is it not to you? How feel you, standing before the Supreme One, knowing that the only gods are the ones he declares? How feel you to have grown up devoting your life to the empty words of another? Do you not feel relieved? Do you not feel happy? Or maybe even…Free?"
"Free?" Naazar said slowly, his eyes narrowing.
"Yes, are you not one who is free from all you despise? Are you not a Freed One in priest robes, a most convincing guise? Or will you once again close your eyes? Continue spouting your words that the Supreme One claims comes from the skies? What will you do High Priest of Nothing but Lies?"
Naazar worked his jaw furiously, but no answer came easily to him. What was he to do? He had long ago begun doubting the existence of the gods. Secret little niggling doubts in the back of his mind. But to actually have his hidden doubts confirmed? To now believe as the Shamed Ones he had been torturing believed? They had always been private little doubts for which he had never given much stock to. He had never prepared himself for what he would do if those doubts were actually realized.
And then the true horror struck him.
If the gods were a lie, then why had they gone to war in this galaxy? There was no point. Millions of Yuuzhan Vong had lost their lives for nothing. They had come to the galaxy on the whim of a madman. Yet there was no way he could hope to go against Shimrra and live. The countless others swayed by the web of lies Shimrra had weaved would cut him down without a second thought. It had only been recently that he had counted himself among those so happily and willingly ready to do Shimrra's bidding, and he knew what the others were capable of. Where their blind fanaticism had gotten them all.
"What *can* I do?" Naazar whispered in despair, his world crashing down around him.
"There is but one solution," Onimi whispered, leaning forward so that his head was next to Naazar's. "A tonic for your ails. To the stars, I have need of you. Go on, unfurl your sails. Find the planet that is origin of us all. The seed of the first true Yuuzhan'tar. Zonama Sekot, is its name. Find it and our people will never be the same."
Naazar's eyes widened. He recognized that name. The name so many feared, indeed the previous Supreme Overlord thought it a bad portent and avoided this galaxy for that very reason. "Zonama Sekot!"
"Yes. We too want the war to end, 'fore our race is completely destroyed. To lose with no home, we'll be cast back into the void. Will

you find this Zonama Sekot, the planet thousands have sought? Or shall all our deaths truly have been for naught?"
Naazar nodded. "I will find the planet. And when I do, I will force the Supreme Overlord to renounce his lies. No more shall our people die needlessly, shall we suffer from his deception."
"And, High Priest of Nothing but Lies. What are you now?" Onimi crackled joyfully.
Naazar inhaled a deep breath, and then through his arms out as he shouted at the Supreme Overlord's bed of polyps. "I am Freed!"
)-(Chapter End)-(
A\N: Next chapter this coming Sunday.
For those who are wondering, Taryn and Trista will not be back in this story, but will have a prominent role in the sequel. Also, the *new* Jedi of the Jedi Order, namely the apprentices like Valin, Yaqeel, and the others, will gradually be taking on a larger role as the story arcs progress. Lastly, just a big, big, thanks and hugs to all who have continued to review and support this story. It's definitely the largest, longest, and most complicated story I've ever written, and your kind words and obvious enjoyment make the effort of writing it more than worth it. Thirty or so chapters to go =).
Deleted Scene:
A single scene this time. This one takes place during the assault on Gorga's base and is from Taryn and Trista's perspective. It would have taken place directly after the Jedi sabotage the base, as the others are waiting for the signal to attack. It was ultimately deleted because of the darker tone it set for the battle. As you saw in Chapter 34, the battle was more lighthearted and fun. It could have gone a whole lot differently…
***Snip**Snip**
"What type of signal is 'explosions and laser fire?'" Taryn muttered darkly, staring through her electrobinoculars in agitation. "What if something's happened to them? How will we know when to go?"
"Zekk's a Jedi, Taryn. He can handle himself." Trista said. Her tone was reproachful, but she too was intently focused on the camp through her own pair of electrobinoculars.
"The two of you are Jedi Zekk's women?" A'Rukven, the warrior Trista had faced the previous night, asked in confusion.
"What?" Trista's eyes bulged and color flooded her cheeks as her head snapped to the Tusken warrior. "No! We're not anybody's women. Nor would we allow any man to claim us as such."
"Speak for yourself," Taryn said unhelpfully, still focused on the base.

Trista closed her eyes and took several calming breaths. "The culture of Hapes is greatly different than your own, A'Rukven. The men…"
A rumbling explosion echoed through the empty expanse of the desert, and great clouds of smoke rose from the base. The constant sound of blaster-fire, coupled with flashes of light, was an indication that an all-out battle was already taking place.
"There's the signal," Vexa said professionally. She stood and let out a warbling yell, thrusting her gaffi stick in the air. Her cry was repeated by hundreds of other voices as the Sand People burst out of the sand and began sprinting towards the walled compound.
The three tribes in opposition scrambled to muster their own lines, but the warriors they put into the field were drastically outnumbered. The attacking force was approaching the compound from all sides, and there weren't enough defending Tusken warriors to meet every challenge. Sand was kicked up on both sides as the warriors charged out to meet each other.
Trista and Taryn ran side-by-side, each holding the weapon they had dueled with the previous night, with a blaster strapped to each leg. Also at their side were both A'Rukven and Ullaghariui and dozens of other warriors. Blaster fire pinged around them as a group of enemy warriors took aim with long-blasters. The shots felled some of the rapidly closing attackers, but not enough.
When the two sides met, the clash was brutal and loud. Tusken war cries continued to fill the air, making both Taryn and Trista glad that they weren't the targets of the rage-filled roars of hundreds of warriors. A large group of enemy warriors won their initial engagements, the bodies of their defeated opponents sprawled in the sand, and raced towards Trista, Taryn, Ullaghariui, and A'Rukven. The four shared a glance, then met the charge head-on.
One of the enemy warriors ending up impaled on Trista's polearm's blade. A'Rukven covered Trista, allowing for the smaller and more nimble girl to use the same technique that she had used on him to get her first 'kill' to slash the femoral arteries of three more warriors. Blood spurted out and splashed over her, but her grey eyes were as smooth and calculating as ever as she readjusted the grip on her weapon and lashed out in a sweeping attack that tripped up another warrior.
For Trista, every warrior that fell was one that couldn't hurt she or Taryn. Couldn't later threaten the Royal House of Hapes through any of their actions. They met her in battle, so she would honor them with one. Show them the fighting techniques of Hapes and make it the last thing they would see. Her mind was cold and methodical as she cut into another enemy Tusken warrior. Thinking of how to best end their

life as quick and as painless as possible, thus ensuring both her own and her sister's continued safety.
Meanwhile both Taryn and Ullaghariui worked together to take down countless opponents of their own. An enemy warrior found his head between the two weighted ends of the Taryn and Ullaghariui's gaffi-sticks. Another had his legs knocked out with twin shattering blows to his kneecaps. It was as if the actions of one influenced the actions of the other. Unlike her sister, however, Taryn couldn't quite distance herself from what she was doing. Fighting with blasters was one thing. Sparring with bladed weapons was in a similar category. But getting up close and personal, actually feeling your opponent's last breath as their blood coats your hand,was on a whole different level. Had Zekk or any of the other Jedi been around, they would have heard Taryn chant under her breath, *animals, only animals. Not people. Not people. Just animals.* The adrenaline of the fight kept Taryn's body moving, but, to protect her sanity, her mind had detached itself from the wanton slaughter occurring all around her.
The reason why the Sand People had a reputation for such visceral and brutal nature was revealed all around Gorga's compound as the sands turned red with blood. It was a kill-or-be-killed atmosphere; the chilling battle cries never ceasing as warriors on both sides continued to fall. No surrender was asked for, and none was given. That was the way of the desert.
Snip**Snip
Like most of the deleted scenes, ideas and concepts from this scene survive in a slightly different forms later on in this story.
Snip**Snip
Reviews are more than welcome. Motivation worked…currently working on Chapter 63, finishing up the first segment of the Unifying Force arc and will soon be writing the Battle for Mon Calamari. See you all Sunday!

ADA 37 Interlude V

Thirty-Seven
=}I{= =}I{=
A week later
The door chime rang, and both Tahiri and Anakin glanced up from their studies. They were reviewing the stories given to them by the Barabel elders they had rescued on Nal Hutta. So far they had no luck discerning where Zonama Sekot had disappeared to after its disastrous visit to the Barab system, but they were able to learn that the planet

was indeed sentient. A delegation of frightened Barabels had entreated with it to leave the system, and it left shortly afterwards.
"Come in," Anakin called out in answer to the chime.
The door opened to reveal the newest member of the High Council. Apparently helping to bring the Hutts into the Galactic Alliance had been a motivating factor to fast-track his advancement. In some ways Anakin was glad that Jacen had found his place in the Jedi Order. It was as if the more Jacen felt comfortable with the Order, the less confrontational their own relationship became. That still didn't mean an odd tension existed, but it was less hostile than before.
"Jace?"
"Anakin, you have a moment?"
"I'll leave you two alone. Taan wanted to talk to me about something anyways," Tahiri said, before Anakin could answer. She gave Anakin a brief kiss before exiting the room.
"Have a seat," Anakin shrugged, slightly bemused. "What brings you to my quarters?"
"A conversation I've been delaying because I couldn't find the right words," Jacen said, spinning the chair at the desk around and sitting in it.
"It's probably the same conversation Tahiri warned me on threat of death that I shouldn't screw up," Anakin smiled.
"Probably," Jacen chuckled, the mood lightening. "Between her and Jaina it's lucky we're both still alive."
"In more ways than one," Anakin agreed. He put down the datapad he had been looking over. "So seriously, Jace. What's wrong?"
"Nothing really," Jacen said, awkwardly. "It's just. I realized that we haven't talked in a while."
"Not unless it was about the Force, battle plans, or searching for wayward planets," Anakin said, motioning to the datapad.
"Yeah, those pesky hyperdrive equipped planets." Jacen shifted in his chair, and then sighed. "I guess it'll be easier for me to say this all at once."
"Go for it," Anakin motioned.
"Okay, first off, I have to say that I'm proud to have you as a little brother. Not just because you can retake all of Hutt Space in a month, or because you can do things with the Force most people can only dream of. I'm proud of you because you can do all that and not let it go to your head. I may accuse you of being reckless from time to time, but it's only because I don't want anything to happen to you. I nearly lost you last year on Myrkr, you nearly got yourself killed getting me off of Coruscant, and no older brother wants to have their younger brother

die before them. So, despite any harsh words or criticism I might give you, just know that they don't change the fact that I'm glad you're my little brother and I wouldn't have it any other way."
Jacen exhaled after the last word and glanced uncertainly at Anakin. Anakin's mind was in turn analyzing Jacen's words, searching for some sort of catch. But at the same time, he could feel Jacen's honesty.
"Thanks," Anakin said softly. "I guess, on some level, I've always known that. But hearing it is nice too. After everything the people expect from me, it's good to know that you have my back, Jacen."
"Of course," Jacen sounded hurt that Anakin would ever doubt that. "We've had our arguments, our differences of opinion, and for the longest time, I was resigned to the fact that we would just be brothers and little else," Anakin admitted glancing down at his feet. He could feel his older brother flinch at his words. "You always seemed to find something wrong in whatever I did. I was never good enough. At one point, I even doubted my own abilities because you didn't find them worthy of a Jedi, of the Solo name. And then, when I went off with Alema to train…"
"I have to admit something," Jacen said, cutting Anakin off. "When you left. Cut us off from you. I knew what was happening, why you were suffering."
"Vergere," Anakin stated.
"Vergere," Jacen confirmed with an apologetic nod.
"I kind of figured it out after returning," Anakin nodded. "After reflecting on what happened, I realized that Brisha used the same techniques on me that Vergere did on you."
"You're not angry?"
"At you?"
"Yeah," Jacen exhaled.
Anakin shook his head. "It may have hurt like heck, but I'm better for it. How about you? Would you stop Vergere from doing the things she did to you if you could?"
Jacen likewise shook his head. "No."
"Yeah," Anakin said, mimicking his brother. "And I have to admit, that I'm also jealous of you too. Jealous and proud, like you said."
"Of me? You're the big hero, the one everyone turns to. You have Tahiri, you have the government following your every word, you have the Jedi supporting you, what do I have that you'd be jealous over?" Jacen said incredulously. He was more surprised than anything. For the longest time, even before the mission to Myrkr, he had always assumed that Anakin's opinion of him had been very low. But to think that Anakin was jealous of him, proud of him even, after everything

Anakin had managed to accomplish? It was shocking to say the least.
Jacen shrugged in confusion. "I'm that 'other guy' everyone tacks on after mentioning you and Jaina. The one who's always in the shadows of your accomplishments. You're proud and jealous of me for that?"
Anakin looked to him wryly. "Jace, if I could switch places with you, I would in a heartbeat. I'd rather be out of the spotlight, some random Jedi with an amazing Jedi girlfriend, than this 'hero' figure everyone wants me to be. It's more than ridiculous every time the HoloNet calls me the future leader of the New Jedi Order, a 'brilliant' military commander, a symbol of hope, and all those other titles worth bantha fodder. I hear those things and then I look at you, at Jaina, and compared to the two of you, I have to say to myself 'I really have no clue what I'm doing.' I *know* I'm reckless, that my judgment isn't always the best, and I know that I've been lucky so far to get as far as I've gotten. You're galaxies better at making important decisions than I am, and there'd probably be more people alive if you had been the one in charge instead of me. If the government and Jedi Order wanted some guiding paragon, they should've look to you, and not me."
"And Jaya's the one who should be getting all the military accolades. She's actually flown missions with the fleet, knows a thing or two more about space battles and military maneuvers. We wouldn't have had as much success over Tatooine and in Hutt Space if it wasn't for her. And yet, in spite of the both of you, everyone *still* looks to me to be that all-in-one leader. And I hate it, plain and simple."
There had been no anger or despair in Anakin's tone, he had simply been stating facts. Jacen took in a breath and released it. The talk was becoming a lot harder than he thought it would have been. From hearing how bad their relationship had deteriorated, to learning that his brother was actually proud of him, Jacen couldn't help but feel a small ache in his stomach. Anakin, Jaina, and himself had once been so close, had freely discussed their opinions and adventures, and were the best of friends at one point.
And then the war happened. And then Chewbacca died. And that close Solo family was no more. The bonds that they had developed through childhood were destroyed with frightening ease, or so it had seemed. Jacen's heart clenched painfully and he struggled to keep his emotions in check. To think that he and Anakin had drifted so far apart that they hadn't even realize how close they still were. What he had told Tahiri aboard the Korr Chokk wasn't the complete truth, Jacen realized. The war had nearly destroyed everything the Solo family once had. The trust, the friendship, the support…everything.

From the closed off expression on his younger brother's face, it was clear Anakin was of similar mind.
A silence fell in the room, as the both of them reflected on everything they had just heard and admitted, their expressions almost sad as they recalled the more peaceful times. Finally, after several long minutes, the two brothers glanced at each other again.
"We worked pretty well together back on Tatooine and at Nal Hutta, didn't we?" Jacen said faintly, trying to stick to a safer topic. He wasn't sure how much more he could take without allowing some of what he was feeling leak through his mental barriers. One thing was for certain, however, he wasn't going to let the war rip them apart any further.
"We didn't once have a shouting match. Your trip to Hapes seemed to have helped out some."
"I was able to clear my mind there, reflect on many things." Jacen nodded. "Well that, and Tenel Ka helped me see I was being a bit thickheaded."
"Tahiri does that to me on a daily basis," Anakin said fondly. Slowly, their sibling bond began to repair itself. Even after everything they had been through, they were still family, still loved each other.
"What would we do without them?" Jacen agreed in amusement.
Anakin managed a weak smile as well. "Tenel Ka make it back to Hapes okay?"
"Yeah, apparently Hapes really did nearly fall apart without her. She told me she probably won't be able to go out again anytime soon. Too many family members plotting her death and the like."
The two fell silent again, avoiding eye contact as they cast about for what to say next. Anakin eventually stood, taking the initiative.
He walked over to Jacen's chair and held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Anakin Solo. A Jedi Knight. I think I'm also your younger brother."
Jacen blinked, but then understood. He rose from his chair and took Anakin's offered hand. "Nice to meet you, I'm Jacen Solo. Also a Jedi Knight, and definitely your older brother."
"Nice to meet you too," Anakin inclined his head. "I look forward to working with you in the future, Jedi Solo."
Jacen chuckled as they shook hands. "You as well, little brother."
=}II{= =}II{=
Later that day Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin all received a comm-call from Tahiri asking them to meet her in one of the many audience chambers the Mon Calamari government had loaned to the Galactic Alliance. She was very evasive about the reason, asking them to come only with an open mind, light clothing, and a fun spirit. Naturally, the curiosity of all three Solos was piqued, and they met up just outside the door.

"Any idea what this is about, Little Brother?" Jaina greeted Anakin as he arrived.
"Not a clue. Although, there is a large amount of Yuuzhan Vong on the other side of that door," Anakin said, a hand resting loosely on his lightsaber in reflex.
"Danni's on the other side too," Jacen cocked his head, puzzled. "So is Tekli."
"Well, the only way we'll find out is if we go in," Anakin pushed the doors open.
A small antechamber with another pair of closed doors separated them from the main room. The burgundy carpeted and walled room was dimly lit and had several lockers lined up along the walls. Tahiri was there to greet them with a nervous smile.
"Hey guys, thanks for coming."
Rather than reply, all three Solo siblings felt their eyebrows rise at Tahiri's choice of dress. She was in one of the faux Yuuzhan Vong vonduun crab armor over her Jedi robes, and a faint application of purplish-blue face-paint made her skin tone closer to that of a Yuuzhan Vong. Her amphistaff was wrapped around her wrist, while an arm holster holding her mother's lightsaber was strapped to her other arm. Temporary tattoos, which both Anakin and Jacen recognized as denoting someone of Domain Kwaad, marked her hands, bare feet, and face. She was emitting no discernible emotion, but the three Solos could tell she was apprehensive about their reactions.
Anakin promptly walked over to her and kissed her, ending any doubt on her part for his feelings about her embracing the Yuuzhan Vong side of herself. Parting, he motioned to her costume. "Is this what Taan wanted to talk to you about?"
Tahiri licked her lips and nodded, visibly relaxing. "Uh huh. Today is the first meeting of the Free Yuuzhan Vong Supreme Council."
"The temporary government Cal Omas is trying to set up for them?" Jaina likewise stepped forward to hug the blond teen.
"Yeah, they kind of want to make it all special," Tahiri motioned to the lockers in the antechamber. "They want the blessings of the avatars of Yun-Harla, Yun-Yammka, Yun-Shuno, and Yun-Ne'shel to continue. Kind of like a religious sanctification to enable them to challenge Shimrra's authority. Though a majority of the members of the Supreme Council are Freed Ones, there are warriors, priests, shapers, and Intendant caste members who have also defected."
"How many people are on this Supreme Council?" Jaina asked as she walked towards the locker with her name on it.

As if she had been expecting the question, Tahiri answered with full detail. "Two from every Domain, both primary and branch Domains, are selected to positions called 'Caretakers'. This means two people from Domain Kwaad and two from Domain Yim, two from Domain Lah and two from Kraal, and so on. There are close to seventy 'Caretakers' at the moment. Then five more people, called the…well, the rough translation is Blessed of the Yun-*Jeedai*, are chosen by the others to be the leaders of the Free Yuuzhan Vong."
"Yun-Jedi?" Jacen asked, snapping on a false vonduun crab armor in place.
Tahiri bit her lower lip in thought. "It's more of an abstract deified version of the beliefs the Jedi hold."
"The Force?" Jaina supplied examining a yorik coral featureless mask that had come with the rest of her costume.
"Not the Force. The Yuuzhan Vong can't feel it." Tahiri shook her head. "Those elected to one of the five seats vow to uphold the morals the Jedi go by and to represent not only what is best for the Yuuzhan Vong, but for the galaxy as well. Basic doesn't really have the right expressions to describe this concept, but that's the best I can manage."
"What's on the schedule for the first session?" Anakin, now fully equipped in the faux armor, walked over to Tahiri. He wore a yorik-coral mask of his own, depicting a male face on one side and a female on the other.
"They're choosing their leader. I guess you could call it a Chief of State," Tahiri grinned, straightening Anakin's mask and making some adjustments to his armor. "And then it's assumed that they will officially declare their support for the Galactic Alliance in its war against Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong."
"And only the Supreme Council will be attending?" Jacen asked, his face hidden by a fearsome-looking mask.
"Oh no," Tahiri shook her head. "All the Freed Yuuzhan Vong who are capable of coming, are here. A recording is being made so others who are already infiltrating Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong, or are in vital positions helping to hold the different sectors on the front lines, can later see this moment. Danni and several others who've served alongside the Freed Ones since Borleias are also here."
"So, do we have to do anything?" Jaina said, fidgeting as she glanced at the double-doors that led into the main chamber.
"You'll hear your name, followed by whichever deity that has been attributed to you," Tahiri explained. "All you have to do is nod or say that you witness and approve of the gathering. It's okay if it's in Basic."

"Would '*Nikk pryozz do-tchurokal tur zhael'Vong*,' work too?" Anakin said innocently, his Yuuzhan Vong phrase causing Tahiri's green eyes to bulge and surprise to spike from his siblings.
"Anakin?" Tahiri whispered in disbelief.
"What? I've been talking with Threepio and Kadat trying to learn a few words here and there. Figured it might come in handy. This seems like as good a time as any to try it out." Anakin shrugged, an action made a bit comical by his mask and clunky faux armor. "I hope I didn't mess up the pronunciation though. I did say that 'I am witness to the true Yuuzhan Vong', right?"
Tahiri nodded dumbly, feeling a surge of powerful emotions for her childhood best friend. She reached out and gripped his hand tightly, letting him know through their bond just how much she loved him. In the background, Jaina and Jacen shared exasperated looks—which went completely unnoticed by the young couple.
"Good," Anakin said, and Tahiri knew that he was grinning his father's grin, even if his face was hidden behind his mask. "It'd be pretty embarrassing if I got up and divinely stated that I smelled like a Hutt's backside, or something like that."
"Don't ever change, little brother," Jaina shook her head and clapped him affectionately on his shoulder.
"Well, we have a crowd in there ready for us," Jacen said. "Let's not keep them waiting any longer."
"And we Jedi say we're not into spectacle," Anakin added.
As one they stepped up to the door and pushed it open.
=}III{= =}III{=
It was the next day when the Solo-Skywalker clan, Tahiri and Jag included, gathered together for a family dinner to celebrate Jacen's advancement to the High Council. It was a private affair within the Skywalker's apartment room, and everything was proceeding uneventfully until Anakin's personal comm-unit beeped. It was a call he had been expecting.
Sheepishly, Anakin excused himself from the table and took it. "Go ahead Danni."
"She's ready," Danni's voice vibrated with excitement in every syllable.
"Right, we'll be right there." Anakin pocketed the comlink and returned to the table.
"What was that about?" Mara asked
"Sorry about that, Jace," Anakin said to his brother. He then turned to his girlfriend. "Hey Tahiri, I kind of have a small, time sensitive gift to give you."
"A gift? What for?" Tahiri set her napkin down.

"A just 'because gift'?" Anakin tried. "It's not really done yet, but your input is definitely needed."
"Anakin?" Leia raised an eyebrow and used the patented stare that all mothers seemed to have perfected.
"Is this the big secret Danni's been so evasive about?" Luke said good-naturedly as Anakin squirmed in his seat.
"It's only a small gift," Anakin said. "Although we do have to go to the Smuggler's Alliance's warehouse downtown."
"Anakin," Jacen exhaled. "You might as well tell them before they die of curiosity. Although I'm not sure 'small' is a good word to describe it."
"You know about it?" Jaina looked to her twin in surprise. "He hasn't told me anything."
"I accidently discovered it when experimenting with my Vongsense," Jacen said, setting aside his own napkin. "I still don't know exactly what it is, but I have a good idea."
"We've finished eating already so we might as well go see this 'small gift' that requires an entire warehouse," Mara said folding her napkin and placing it onto her emptied plate.
Anakin managed a feeble smile. "Might as well."
The Skywalker-Solo clan piled into two speeders, and with Anakin directing them, made it to a non-descript warehouse purchased by Tendrando Arms and on loan to the Smuggler's Alliance. Danni was already outside, looking ready to burst with energy as she happily waved at them in welcome.
"Hey! Sorry if I spoiled any plans," Danni greeted brightly.
"It's not a problem," Leia said. "Are you doing well, Danni?"
"Yeah, I have the job of a lifetime." The Jedi scientist smiled evasively. "And those supplies that we got from the Runaway Prince are just... wow. Talk about a dream job."
"And this has to do with Anakin's gift to Tahiri?" Luke said mildly.
"Everything to do with it," Danni motioned to the warehouse behind her. "Come on in."
Tahiri glanced curiously up at Anakin, he simply smiled and took her hand. With a shrug, she allowed him to escort her into the building.
Meeting them just inside the entrance was Kadat, who bowed lowly to Anakin. "Welcome back, avatar of She-Who-Shapes. The yorik-coral seeds you procured for us are being used to strengthen the armor. And we have just started molding the grutchin pen into the sub-deck per the Calrissian's instructions."
Anakin made a mental note to revoke Lando's interior-design permit.
"Thank you, Kadat. I am sure Tahiri approves as well. Tahiri?"

Tahiri, along with the rest of the group, was stunned into silence as they tried to wrap their minds on the sight before them. Behind Kadat was a sleek-looking ship slightly smaller than Lando's *Lady Luck.* The ship, unlike anything they had ever seen, sat illuminated by both artificial lights and bioluminescent spheres, with scaffolding all around it. It was nearly grown, but the coral had yet to come together to close off the top of the naturally curved vessel, so the ship's skeletal-like metal frame was still partially visible. Freed Yuuzhan Vong shapers and engineers hired by Lando were working on various parts of the nearly-completed vessel. Seeing the group, the shapers and engineers all respectfully halted their work and moved aside, leaving the vessel alone in the spotlights.

"Anakin," Tahiri whispered in shock. Taking a step forward in an almost trance-like fashion.

"I call her the *Veila*," Anakin remarked softly.

Tahiri's legs automatically took her to the prow of the ship, and she placed her hand on its coral surface. Slowly, she ran her hand down the length of the vessel, finding the nodule for the boarding ramp. She stroked the cluster gently, and the ship opened for her. She looked back at Anakin with watery eyes and held out a hand. He stepped forward and took it, and together they boarded the ship.

Its layout was different than most Yuuzhan Vong vessels. Like a vine, the yorik coral had adapted itself to the metal skeleton within the ship, growing around, and shaping itself based on the frame. The design of the ship was also both Yuuzhan Vong and non-Yuuzhan Vong. The boarding ramp led up to a round, central chamber, where naturally curved corridors, at evenly spaced intervals, led off to individual rooms; living quarters, dovin basal chamber, an ion drive, shield generators. A holoprojector sat in the center of the main chamber, along with a villip choir that was still being grown. Tahiri took it all in in disbelief.

They explored the ship a little before they eventually reached the cockpit of the vessel. It was a nodule-like compartment not unlike the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon;* situated just off-center left to the front of the ship. The cockpit itself was big enough to hold six people comfortably, and had a certain sort of warmth about it.

Sitting on a cluster of organic matter at the very front of the cockpit, awaiting Tahiri, was a cognition hood.

"Go on," Anakin whispered softly. "You'll be the first mind the *Veila* will know."

Swallowing heavily, Tahiri nodded and reverently placed the hood over her head. In an instant, an infant-like consciousness touched her own

mind. She could see through its own developing senses, as well as the electronic sensors that it had already tapped into. The ship's presence was curious, welcoming, and warm. It was almost playful in nature. Tahiri was more than a little surprised when it mentally asked for her name. Yuuzhan Vong ships normally communicated through emotional impressions only, never words.
"I'm Tahiri, Tahiri Kwaad," Tahiri said aloud.
I'm told my name is Veila. Is that my name?
"Uh huh."
Good, I like my name.
"I like it too," Tahiri said, patting the nerve cluster in front of her. As the ship matured, a hardened shell of coral would cover the cluster, but it was still vulnerable for now. The ship seemed to trill softly at the touch.
Are you my master now?
Tahiri bit her lower lip and shook her head. "I am your friend."
Friend?
Tahiri felt the ship skim her mind for a definition. Then, as if flipping to a more instinctive level, went on to gloss through the rest of her mind, leaning the things she knew, analyzing her feelings and thoughts towards certain people and ideas. On some level, Tahiri had expected this. It was a natural part of any Yuuzhan Vong ship, the way it learned its purpose. It was part of the bonding process that many Yuuzhan Vong life-forms were capable of.
Yet, on another level, this ship appeared to be slightly more sentient than a standard Yuuzhan Vong ship. Maybe because its growth had been slowed, or because it had computers that allowed for data to be inputted directly into it. For whatever the reason, Tahiri had a feeling that the *Veila* was more *alive* than an actual Yuuzhan Vong ship, even with all its metal parts. She reached out with her Vongsense and her beliefs were confirmed by the level of awareness she felt coming from the ship.
You are my friend. Tahiri heard, the voice much more mature. The words sounded final. The warmth was still present, and Tahiri got the sense that the ship seemed more determined than ever to serve her. *I will finish growing now. Good bye, Tahiri.*
Tahiri felt the words fade away, and she was once again left with emotional impressions. It was as if the ship's brain had a higher and lower setting with which it could use to communicate. Very slowly, Tahiri removed the cognition hood, blinking in stunned awe at the ship around her.
"So," Anakin began hesitantly. "What do you think of the shmphh…"

Tahiri silenced him with a fierce kiss. To the surprise of both of them, the lights within the cockpit dimmed, and an opaque screen—originally designed to block out the glare of a sun—rolled down over the viewports, granting them privacy. Tahiri let out a giggle and patted the ship's walls affectionately.
"Thanks *Veila*."
"She's probably using the internal sensors to see what's…" Anakin was again cut off as Tahiri pressed her lips to his. He gripped her, and she used his support to leverage herself upwards, wrapping her legs around his waist. He pressed her against the bulkhead as she intensified their kiss. Things were just starting to get heated when they heard someone clear their throat.
They both glanced up through the yet to be grown roof of the ship. On the scaffolding above was the rest of the Skywalker-Solo family, looking on in embarrassed amusement.
"Oh!" Tahiri's cheeks blazed, unwrapping her legs from around Anakin and readjusting her shirt.
"I'm guessing you liked the gift, Tahiri," Mara said deadpan.
Tahiri nodded, pressing her crimson face against Anakin's chest.
"Can we come inside the ship to check it out?" Jacen said. "The ship kind of closed the ramp when the two of you started…well…"
Anakin felt his own cheeks burn. "Sure. No problem."
Tahiri reached back over to the cognition hood, not looking up at the other members of the Solo-Skywalker family even once. "Tsii dau vaashii."
The ramp to the ship slid back open. Then, a second later, un-ordered, the opaque film retracted itself and the lights in the cockpit brightened again.
"At least we know the ship likes us," Anakin muttered into Tahiri's hair.
"Uh huh," Tahiri smiled against his chest, her cheeks still red. "I think she and I are going to get along just fine."
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"Anakin provided the blueprint as well as the concept models for a majority of tech in the ship," Danni explained, leading the group on an official tour through the *Veila.* "Since the *Veila* is a one-of-a-kind ship, we had to improvise and learn with it as it grew."
"And how did he manage to convince you and the Freed Ones to help out?" Leia asked.
"We didn't need much convincing," Danni grinned sheepishly. "The chance to work both Yuuzhan Vong and our own tech together was a fun challenge for everyone involved. Lando provided the metal parts while the Freed Ones would bring in material captured from the various

shaper compounds the Galactic Alliance captured. The haul from the Runaway Prince was like winning the lottery. Too bad the Hutts and Galactic Alliance Intel had their first pick of the stuff though."
"I take it that these Freed Ones are different than the Freed Ones who are currently running around giving the Supreme Overlord a headache?" Han voiced.
"Uh huh," Danni nodded. She motioned to where a pair of Freed Ones were shaping one of the ship's weapons. "The Cult of Life is completely devoted to Yun-Ne'Shel, the Shaping goddess. They're actually doing this on their free time, and have enjoyed Shaping this ship. When they're not here, they're with me helping the Intelligence division work out new ways to counter Yuuzhan Vong biotech. Our main assignment at the moment is to cancel out the negative effects, or completely neutralize the slaveseeds embedded within the prisoners taken by the Yuuzhan Vong."
"But the seeds are attached to the central nervous system," Jacen said.
"Hey, we like the challenge," Danni said, gesturing to the ship all around her in example. "The *Veila*'s metal endoskeleton is actually hollow and strategically designed on the inside, allowing for the yorik coral to grow at very specific angles within the metal-carbon frame. The skeleton is also perforated at various junctures, permitting the coral to spread along the outside of the frame as well. This strengthens both the nature of the coral, due to the configuration within the frame, and the frame as a whole, since the coral also reinforces the exterior. The frame itself was actually modified several times once we began to see how the *Veila*'s yorik coral adapted to its presence."
"Amazing," Jaina said in wonder, running her fingers along the inner bulkhead. "And the *Veila* doesn't mind the computers or other tech within her?"
The grin Danni had worn since bringing the group into the warehouse had yet to go away at their stupefied state. Talking about Yuuzhan Vong biotech was a favorite past time of hers, and she relished any chance she got to share her work.
She motioned them back into the central chamber and, with a nod from Tahiri, Danni unhooked a cognition hood from the side wall and held it out to Jaina. "Ask her yourself.
"I don't know any Yuuzhan Vong," Jaina said, hesitantly taking the hood.
"She's bilingual," Tahiri giggled. "Well, multi-lingual. I think the techs downloaded a copy of Threepio's language packet into the droid brain. She knew Sand People language too."

As Jaina set the hood over her head, Danni reached out to the holoprojector and activated it. When Jaina began speaking with the ship, the *Veila's* replies appeared in text format over the holoprojector.
"Okay, now I'm more than impressed," Mara whispered, shaking her head in disbelief.
"The central computer was a blank droid brain specially designed by Anakin," Danni continued. "When the *Veila* was old enough, it more or less synced itself to the droid brain. This enabled us to teach her by inputting information directly into the droid brain. Like Tahiri noticed, one of the first things we did was give the *Veila* some language lessons. It was simple enough, and practical too. With the upload, the shapers and multi-racial techs didn't have any problems communicating with her. After some trial and error, and a small learning period, she was eventually able to take control of the mechanical elements of the ship."
Jaina ended her conversation with the ship, looking even more bewildered than before. The other members of the group took turns using the cognition hood so that they could all say 'hi' to the ship. The *Veila* seemed more than happy to welcome the family of Tahiri, though it mostly reverted to emotional surges in reply as it concentrated its energy on growing.
Jacen, more than impressed, managed to come up with a word to sum up his discussion with the *Veila*. "Wow."
"Wow," Tahiri agreed happily. "Isn't she great?"
"Wow," Jacen nodded, apparently able to say little more as he tried to wrap his mind around the hybrid vessel.
"The *Veila* has redundant systems," Anakin continued the tour. "For every mechanical device, it is also equipped with a Yuuzhan Vong equivalent. There's a villip choir, but also a HoloNet transceiver, dovin basal and engines, and so on."
"Have you run into problems incorporating the two?" Jag asked.
"Some," Anakin nodded. "Sometimes a mechanical device had to be heavily modified or needed a new version of it created altogether, to fit with the organic components. The reverse is also true. I'm told that both Kadat and Wryadra were forced to become experts in shaping alternate versions of standard pieces of Yuuzhan Vong biots because the metal pieces created unforeseen complications."
"It was our pleasure, avatar of Yun-Ne'shel," Kadat acknowledged, working on the finishing touches of the ship's grutchin pit.
The group exited the ship, though Tahiri seemed extremely reluctant to do so. Once outside, Leia glanced at her husband with an impish

smile. "So, Han. Anakin's giving Tahiri this ship as a 'just because' gift. Am I getting a present anytime soon?"
Han turned out to be very good at mimicking the sea-life of Mon Calamari as his mouth opened and closed while he struggled for an answer. He eventually turned on his youngest son and wagged a finger at him. "See what you did. The next time you get an urge to give Tahiri a gift, give me an advance warning so I can go buy a moon or planet, or something elaborately overpriced, for your mother."
"Please give me an appropriate warning as well," Jag commented, glancing to Jaina. "I am still trying to come up with something to match your trip to Tatooine."
"I'll try," Anakin replied as the group broke out into amused chuckles.
"The *Veila*'s wonderful, Anakin," Leia patted her son's arm.
"Worked out better than I hoped." Anakin said modestly. All the while, Tahiri continued to project her love for him through their Force-bond as she held onto his other arm. "And it's really all thanks to Danni, Kadar, Wryadra, and Lando that the *Veila* turned out the way she did."
"She's still a couple months away from being space worthy," Danni chimed in. "She just needed that extra kick from Tahiri's mind, to understand her purpose."
As the rest of the group continued to chatter excitedly about the vessel, Luke hung back, watching Anakin almost wistfully.
He had been thinking much during his free time.
Now that the weight of the Jedi Order was no longer squarely on his shoulders, he was able to reflect on his own actions, the choices he had made during the war. Watching Anakin, Luke could clearly see what made him special; stand out amongst all the other Jedi. At the same time, he knew that Anakin would be the last to admit it.
Anakin may not have been on the High Council, but his word could probably sway more people than any council decree ever could. Even when liberating Hutt Space or creating a hybrid Yuuzhan Vong vessel that no one else would have ever thought of, he didn't brag about it or let the accomplishments go to his head.
Which made Luke's repeated visions about his nephew all the more confusing. How could Anakin go dark, or be consumed by darkness if he was such a caring and modest person? What was this shadow that continued to loom around his nephew? Luke continued to look on, unable to reconcile the two conflicting images he was seeing. On one hand, there was that possible future of darkness consuming the galaxy with Anakin at the forefront of it all. On the other, there was the image of his nephew in the here-and-now, smiling as he kept an arm draped around his girlfriend and was surrounded by his family.

Anakin dark? A ship such as the *Veila* would have been a vital breakthrough for the Galactic Alliance scientists and Intelligence officials. What does Anakin do instead? He gives the ship to Tahiri as a gift. Luke smiled wryly at that. There was no mistaking the emotions flooding out of the young blond girl as she was surrounded by her adoptive family.

Tahiri was just one of many people who had a definite place in the galaxy thanks to Anakin's actions. Luke counted himself as one of those fortunate people. For the longest time Luke had feared what would happen to the Order should anything happen to himself. They all continuously looked to him for advice, for direction. Even those who operated at the fringes of the Order were at least grateful that he brought the Order back from near extinction. Yet, the Order was divided by so many differences of opinion that Luke sometimes felt that they only stayed together out of respect for him. Now that a council was in charge of the Jedi, and his own role was slowly being phased out, Luke felt those fears slowly evaporating.

Watching Anakin, Jaina, and Jacen, Luke felt a surge of reassurance and took comfort in the fact that the Order would remain strong. Luke breathed softly, keeping a wan smile on his face as the group walked around the *Veila* to inspect its outsides. For the first time in a long while, Luke felt a sense of accomplishment when it came to the Order. He had done what he had set out to do all those years ago. He had re-founded the Jedi Order, built it back up from scratch despite all the challenges and setbacks. He had helped to make it self-sufficient, and grounded in the traditions it had come from. Now it was time to hand over the reins to a new generation. He was more than happy to step aside now.

Of course he would still support his niece and nephews if they needed his help. But from what he had seen, he doubted they would. They were a team, an unstoppable one. With them leading the way into a new era, Luke was more than content to just sit back and see the changes they would bring to this new Jedi Order.

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Little did Luke know that Anakin, Jaina, and Jacen would soon meet their first test as de facto leaders of the Order. Almost a week later, a gathering of Jedi Knights and Masters throughout the galaxy had been called to discuss the progress of the war and to make preparation for its eventual end. From the passionate shouts sounding from the large amphitheater, not all agreed with the current course of the war.

"It is ridiculous!" Waxarn Kel gestured towards the Solo siblings. His face and scalp were pink and covered in fresh scars, indicating that he

was one of the many Jedi who had suffered during the war. Behind him were fifteen other Knights, all siding with him. "That Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin should ally themselves to the very people our brothers and sisters have died fighting! Make friends with the Vong? You can't make friends with them! They're nothing but murderous thugs who've killed trillions! Not millions, or billions even, but *trillions!* And worse, the Solos think that working with the Galactic Alliance government is the best course of action for the Order. We all remember where working with the New Republic government got us the first time, and the politicians are all the same! This is a recipe for disaster my friends. We cannot and should not follow them or their advice. No matter if their uncle is the disgraced Jedi Master Skywalker, or their parents are famed war heroes."

"That's going too far," Kyp said sharply. "None of us would be here without Master Skywalker. True we have all had our differences of opinion with him at one point in time, but leave him out of this."

"Then what say you, Master Durron?" Waxarn called up to Kyp. "You out of all people should know what I am talking about. You even formed your own squadron of Jedi and went out to fight the Vong when this order was paralyzed by politics and cowardice!"

"A Jedi must keep *all* options available and do what they feel is best," Kyp responded, holding Waxarn's eyes. "But tell me, *Jedi Knight* Kel, if we meet the aggression of the Yuuzhan Vong with more aggression. Kill one of them for every one of us they kill. Destroy their planets. Massacre their children. Hunt down and slaughter every single one of them. What will we become? Will we still be Jedi? Or will we have turned into the very people we are fighting? All this fighting and death has to end sometime. If making peace with those of the Yuuzhan Vong will help end the fighting sooner, I'm all for it."

"Surely you don't think that the Solos can remain impartial on the matter because of the company they keep?" One of Waxarn's backers, Balos, a Duros Jedi who had been blinded in one eye by voxyn venom, stepped forward. "For all we know, their Vong friends are trying to get us to drop our guard, are worming their way into our civilization just as they did when they first invaded this galaxy."

"We have to show the Vong that the Jedi are not push overs. That they cannot switch sides just because they've begun losing the war." A second Waxarn supporter, Jalinae, a human woman, added. "Just as the Galactic Alliance is still run by the same politicians that handed this galaxy over to the Vong; by not completely crushing the Yuuzhan Vong's spirit, we allow the same warriors and leaders who have massacred the populations of entire planets, to live. The same warriors

and leaders who have shown no qualms about killing innocents and destroying worlds."
"Remember, everyone. The Vong didn't just kill our friends and family, but *murdered and tortured* them! Turned them into science experiments for their own twisted pleasure. They've created weapons specifically to target us, have done whatever they could to kill Jedi wherever they went," Ralan, a third Waxarn supporter yelled, his remaining lek twitching. He had lost the other in combat and hadn't quite been the same since. "Where are our friends Jovan and Ulaha now? How about Raynar and Eryl? Did these cowardly Shamed Ones even move a muscle when our friends truly needed them? If these 'Freed Ones' are so devoted to our cause, why have they waited until nearly half our number has been thinned before approaching us? They let our friends die, I say we return the favor! To do otherwise would be to make a mockery of the sacrifices of Eryl, Jovan, and all the other Jedi who've died fighting for our cause."
"These so called Freed Ones need us more than we need them," a fourth Waxarn supporter continued. "What are they but the servant class? They only truly came to our side after military victories on our side. That just shows that the only way to truly end this war is through military means. Not some peace treaty or the half-baked council of Vong the Chief of State wants to put together. And this new government should be ashamed of itself for even considering such an agreement. After everything they've done, everything we've had to suffer because of their blundering bureaucracy, they're still making the same missteps that nearly doomed us at the start of the war."
"I'm sorry, I'm a bit confused," Corran cut in. "Who exactly is the enemy here? The Yuuzhan Vong, or the Galactic Alliance? Because from what I'm hearing from you, it sounds as if you're grouping them together."
"In my days," Vergere spoke up, her voice soft but instantly quieting the entire room. "In my days, the Jedi Order was separate from the government. We may have advised the Chancellor from time to time, but we did not take his orders. Nor were we at his beck and call, or had to inform him of our every movement. It is odd that the Order of this age allows itself to be shackled in such a manner. Do you not all find it restricting?"
Vergere excused herself from the room after her comments, though no one would later be able to recall even seeing her in the room in the first place. At that moment, though, her words were like oil thrown onto crackling embers; the din in the room became almost deafening as the arguments immediately rose in pitch once more.

"You call yourselves Masters, but do you really have the Order's best interest in mind?" One shouted out.
"I hear you won't do anything without the say so of the Chief of State!" Another yelled at the sitting, Jedi members of the High Council. "This is the Jedi Order, not the Jedi of the Galactic Alliance!"
"The current arrangement will only lead to our ruin!"
"Where does the government end and the Order begin?"
"We didn't elect you as our leaders, Skywalker did! And we all know where following his decisions have gotten us!"
And then the counter arguments flew back out in a flurry of chaos.
"Pure aggression without reason will only lead to the dark side!"
"We all have to work together in this war! If we must side with the government to do so, then so be it. As long as we remember that we serve the Force."
"The Jedi must stand united. Put aside your disagreements for the sake of peace!"
"We are trying to keep as many of you alive as possible. We don't want a prolonged war!"
Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin, who had been completely quiet throughout the entire meeting, noticed that both Luke and Mara were likewise remaining silent; even as the room exploded in a yelling match between the different factions of Jedi in the room.
Instead of speaking out to stop the arguments, both Jedi Masters had their gazes directed meaningfully at the Solo siblings.
"I'm getting a headache," Anakin muttered softly. Jedi were now standing in front of their chairs, gesturing and yelling over other arguments. Some even had to be held back as insults were thrown. Though a diverse Jedi Order was good in many ways, it also had some pretty big weaknesses.
"To think Uncle Luke had to put up with this for a couple of decades," Jaina said darkly. None of the first generation Jedi or the other Masters appeared capable of halting the chaos, even when they put the full strength of the Force in their words. Everyone was talking, but no one was listening.
"Wanna put a stop to this?" Jacen looked to his siblings with a wan smile.
The other two nodded, and all three stood in unison. Emanating powerful waves of Force energy, they began to walk down the stairs from the top row of seats, and towards the stage occupied by Waxarn and his backers. Silence once again fell, whether out of respect of the three or stunned by the sheer amount of power the three were projecting, it didn't matter.

Waxarn didn't back down when they stepped onto the stage. "I was wondering when you three would say something."
"We just wanted to see how far everyone would go," Jacen answered glibly.
"And I'm curious how far the three of you will go," Waxarn countered. "Will you doom us all for the sake of your foolish and hopeful ideals?"
"Perhaps my brother, sister, and I are prejudiced in favor of the Yuuzhan Vong." Anakin acknowledged, silently absorbing the negative energy in the room. He briefly inclined his head towards Alema when he sensed that she was doing the same. "But the success of the Freed Ones is still an undeniable fact. They have saved lives, given their lives, and bled to protect *our* way of life. They are willing to work side by side with us no matter how many people hate them or distrust them. The first of them braved the insults and abuse of the soldiers and Borleias, continued to aid us even though they were in the perfect position to betray us. Imagine, Waxarn, an entire base of soldiers who shared your opinion, that the Yuuzhan Vong must be killed to the last man. But Taan and the others stood by them still, and helped them get out of there alive. The Jedi Order can no longer afford to stand alone. The first time we did, the Emperor signaled us out and the galaxy turned their backs because they believed him. The second time we did, we became scapegoats or dangerous busybodies, and the galaxy rallied against us.
We have all lost friends and loved ones. We have all felt anger, the need for revenge, fear, despair, sorrow, or even hatred, at some point in this war. That is understandable. The same heart that allows you to feel happiness, love, and compassion, also enables you to feel their opposites. Despite the old Jedi Code which forbid anything but serenity, feeling hate or love is not wrong. You are all living beings and are allowed to feel as you will. In fact, use those feelings to give you strength, to hearten you in dark times. *But,* it's when you let those feelings control your actions, consume your every waking moment and thought, that lives are endangered. Do not let others suffer, do not make yourselves suffer, because your hate, your fear, was so strong, that they were the only things you were using to guide yourselves."
"Think from a logical stand point," Jacen said evenly, projecting a soothing aura to disperse the last of the tension. "The more Yuuzhan Vong who side with us, the less we'll have to fight in the future. We won't have our grief compounded by the loss of any more friends or family. The great military victories at Ebaq Nine, Borleias, Obroa-Skai, and others, were made possible because those who planned the attacks understood the Yuuzhan Vong. Understood their way of life and

culture. They used their minds to minimize our losses, even if it meant that some of the Yuuzhan Vong would escape. They did not needlessly throw away the lives of soldiers even if those deaths might have meant one more dead Yuuzhan Vong.
This is a war of beliefs, not of absolute annihilation. The Yuuzhan Vong Freed Ones believe that the Jedi are their salvation, that we can offer them another way of living, apart from the endless cycle of violence and suffering. The Yuuzhan Vong under the Supreme Overlord Shimrra believe that their gods had told them that this galaxy was theirs, that they have to bring everyone here to believe as they do. The Galactic Alliance believes that we should not have to give up our way of living at gun point. The Peace Brigade truly believed that they were helping to save the galaxy and end the war by turning us over to the Yuuzhan Vong. And the Jedi, well, we're just discussing what the Jedi should believe."
"The thing about fighting a war is that people on both sides will die. But it's how we choose to remember them that will really matter in the long run." Jaina finished, she closed her eyes for a moment and made herself the anchor for a new Jedi meld. Both her brothers joined in immediately, as did Tahiri, Zekk, Tekli, Tenel Ka, Lowbacca, Tesar, Alema, and Danni. "We are all hurting. We all want to protect each other from any more hurt. We all want to do justice to the memory of those we lost. Shall we honor their memory by committing genocide? By abandoning everything that makes us a Jedi just so their deaths won't go un-avenged? We are the Jedi Order of the here and now. We are a team, a family. We will protect each other the best we can by using our minds first and our hearts second. We will have our disagreements. Any family does. But when it comes down to it, we are still Jedi. We will laugh as one. Fight as one. And grieve as one. Together."
Slowly, more Jedi Knights began to join the meld. A myriad of feelings sounded back and forth. Pain was being drawn away, soothed. Comfort. Peace. The losses they had suffered were assuaged by the fact that they were not alone. They were with friends, family. This was their place in the galaxy.
Several long seconds ticked pass. Where there had once been chaos, a deafening din, a peaceful silence descended in its place.
"We are the New Jedi Order," Zekk said calmly, his voice projecting throughout the silent hall as he walked down the stairs to join his friends. "Our lives are intertwined no matter what our personal differences are. We are connected by our feelings, by our desire to

keep the darkness in this galaxy at bay, to protect those in need, and by the Force."
"We may draw our traditions from bygone eras, but it is what we do now that will be remembered by future generations," Tenel Ka said evenly, regally descending from her seat. "We have a chance to clearly define what it means to be a Jedi, have within ourselves the ability to shape the future; to create a galaxy that can be truly at peace after all these years of warring."
"[Our choices will define who we are, will be the true testament to our courage and morals.]" Lowbacca growled softly, joining the others.
"[We were scattered, but now we are one. We were lost, but now we have a purpose. Focus not on the negatives that separate us, but on the positives that bind us together.]"
"We are an Order of many people. We all have our strengths, our own opinions, our own sets of values," Tekli spoke up, her soft voice stretching out to the corners of the room as she too stood and made her way down. "And as an Order, we will learn from them, accept them, and become all the stronger for it. We will act not in haste or in grief, but with wisdom and empathy. Bringing knowledge to those without, hope where there was once despair, healing to those who are hurting."
"It iz up to uz to define what it meanz to be a Jedi now. What it meanz to be the protectorz of this galaxy," Tesar's voice rang with strength in the silent room, the meld growing in power and presence by the second. "Whether we persevere and become known for our compassion and kindnez, or give in to our baser instinctz and become feared for our mercilessss wayz. We can predatorz, but at the same time we can also show otherz that there is an alternative to becoming our prey."
"All of us want this war to end, these dark times to be over. For everything to have been just a nightmare. And it will be, in time," Alema's slender form sashayed down the aisle. "Mourn those who have passed on into the Force, but celebrate their life. You have to live on for their sake after all. And, when all is said and done, when you too rejoin the Force, you'll see them again and can hold your head up proud when you do."
"Our backgrounds are all unique, they are what shapes our decisions and makes this Order so successful," Tahiri said, gesturing to the three scars on her forehead as she followed Alema. "So long as we are fighting for the same thing, share a common goal, we are all friends, allies, people I would be proud to call family no matter what your past

is. We are unbeatable, but *only* if we stand together and learn to accept our allies, flaws and all."
"Together," Jacen and Anakin confirmed. Anakin draped an arm around Tahiri's shoulder while Jacen and Tenel Ka looked to each other and exchanged the faintest of grins. "We will bring this war to an end and show the galaxy the heart and soul of what it means to be Jedi. Together, we are the New Jedi Order."
Jaina walked up to Waxarn and held out a hand, a soft and caring smile on her face. "Together, Jedi Knight Kel?"
Waxarn swallowed a lump in his throat and looked down. He could sense the power of the bond pulsating in front of him, but was reluctant to join it. Those with him were likewise shaken. They were called the Death Knights for a reason. Not because they brought death, but because, in many ways, they were already dead. They were among the Jedi who had lost the most, mentally, physically, emotionally. Like Alema had once been, they were all broken in one way or another. The only question that remained was whether they wanted to feel some semblance of wholeness once more.
The seconds continued to pass in silence, the meld reaching out its arms in warm welcome to the wayward Death Knights.
Waxarn licked his lips, tears falling from his eyes as he finally reached out to grip Jaina's forearm. "Together."
Waxarn's presence was welcomed into the meld, as was that of his followers, with the Force equivalent of a protective, loving hug. As one, the Jedi in the room grieved together. As one, they rejoiced at the happier memories. For that moment in time, the Jedi Knights of the Order were united in thought and feeling.
The Solo siblings glanced up to the Masters and first-generation Jedi and made a small 'come on,' motion with their heads. With wry grins, both Kyp and Corran added their presence, their experience in dealing with traumatic memories being shared with the collective consciousness. Cilghal's presence seemed to wash away some of the more painful feelings, like an ocean wave lapping at the shore. Tresina, Saba, and Kenth all joined in as well, their powerful presences reinforcing the Jedi they tried their best to guide. Kam and Tionne, shared a happy smile as they held hands and likewise let their Force presences join with the others; sharing how proud they were of all the younger Jedi they had helped to raise and who were now becoming leaders in their own right.
The pain that the Masters had hid for the good of the Order, the losses they had felt, both old and new, were all brought to the surface, all

experienced by the Order. That pain was then accepted, comforted and relieved.
Thankfulness from the meld radiated to the Masters, for being so strong for their sake, for enduring so much. And the ties between the Knights and Masters grew stronger still.
The last two individuals yet to join the meld, looked on with pride and a small sense of nostalgia. Luke and Mara glanced towards the Solos, as if asking for permission. Unexpectedly, the entire meld seemed to reach out to the two of them in invitation.
As Luke and Mara merged their own thoughts and feelings with the meld, the Solos utilized the strength of all the Jedi in the room and sent out a pulse through the Force, reaching out to the Jedi scattered across the stars.
To the apprentices.
To the countless Force sensitives who had yet to realize their full potential.
The pulse did not last long, but for a moment, despite the different opinions, feelings, personalities, and thoughts, they were a Jedi Order truly unified through the Force.
=}VI{= =}VI{=
A week had passed since the gathering of the Jedi, and the Order still remained strong and united. Though many returned to their duties across the galaxy, a good many had stayed behind. For the first time in a very long while, the Jedi of the Jedi Order were moving with a purpose.
After some discussion between the different factions within the Order, it was agreed that the many Jedi would focus on what they were best at for the good of the Order as a whole.
Kenth Hamner and the more politically minded Jedi began to work on strengthening the Order's ties with the various branches in the Galactic Alliance government, namely the Senate. Leia Organa Solo even chipped in a few tidbits of advice from her experiences in the political arena, and helped Kenth and the others win over several senators in key committees. The Order this time around was determined to ensure that the Jedi had allies in the government, that the Jedi had a say in the laws being passed. If the Jedi were going to work to preserve the Galactic Alliance, they wanted to be sure that the Galactic Alliance would return the favor in a time of need. And now that they had a single cause and purpose, it was all the easier to present the Senate with a united front.
A second group, coordinated by Mara and aided by Pal'iva Konat, spent their time courting the media outlets, giving interviews, and

performing small services to the public—such as helping to build a school in a refugee camp—to continue Ganner and Anakin's work of enlightening the public about the Jedi. They were the 'New' Jedi Order, and were making great strides to distance themselves from the cold and unfeeling mystics of the bygone era. This group benefited the Order in more than one way. While they enhanced the reputation of the Jedi Order, this also allowed for some of the weaker Jedi, or Jedi opposed to fighting in the war, a chance to contribute to the Order and make a positive difference in the galaxy.

Meanwhile, in what was quickly becoming known as the 'military arm' of the Jedi Order, Waxarn Kel and the more hawkish Jedi had been gathered by Jaina, Corran, and Kyp to plot out the first stages for a final battle against the Yuuzhan Vong. It had been generally agreed upon that the Supreme Overlord would most likely be the least susceptible to a peace treaty, and since a majority of the Yuuzhan Vong military was still loyal to him, one last battle would be needed to remove him from power. That is, of course, on the condition that Zonama Sekot was found and was willing to help.

To prepare for the end, they began assigning specially selected teams of Jedi to the different Galactic Alliance fleet groups to both gain experience in battle and augment the fleets' abilities. It was a giant step forward from simply allowing the Jedi to go to war, and there had been some arguments about Jedi falling to the dark side from prolonged exposure to the death and destruction. Saba, Tesar, and the other Wild Knights, however, vouched for the effectiveness of the Jedi meld, indicating that teams of Jedi in the field would last much longer with each other as support. Even then there had been detractors, so a compromised had been reached. No less than three Jedi would be on a team sent to one fleet or another, with all Jedi receiving mandatory half-month-long leaves for every three months spent on the frontlines. This allowed for the Jedi to decompress, and kept a check on any possible dark-side 'slides' that might have occurred during those months at war.

And for the purposes of trying to end the war, another group of Jedi was assembled for the sole task of searching for Zonama Sekot. Jacen, Kyle Katarn, and Tresina Lobi, along with a handful of other Jedi, were among those to join in the search. They were working with senators from Outer Rim worlds, accessing star charts, and even departing from Mon Calamari to find the occasional tap cafs frequented by deep space pilots. These were mostly the Jedi who tended to be on the fringes of the Order, who had connections that might not otherwise be considered acceptable to a mainstream Jedi. But at the same time, this

united the fragmented and wayward Jedi by giving them a purpose, a goal to add to their otherwise independent, adventuring ways.
Yet not all Jedi were focused on politics, the military, or Force-sensitive, hyperdrive-equipped planets. Cilghal, Tekli, and Danni teamed up with Freed One shapers and recruited those of the Order curious about Yuuzhan Vong biotech. While Yuuzhan Vong culture and combat lessons were handled by Tahiri, Alema, and Anakin. The apprentices—Valin, Jysella, and the others—were in attendance for these lessons specifically. The fact that Shaeri, Taan, and other Freed Ones helped out at these lessons also helped the younger Jedi get over any lingering fears they may have had about coming face to face with the Yuuzhan Vong.
Much to the bewilderment and amusement of Han Solo, C-3PO and Shaeri even got together to teach some introductory Yuuzhan Vong language lessons aboard the *Falcon* during the day, and Basic language lessons for the Freed Yuuzhan Vong during the night. They were using the *Falcon* because, when the Mon Calamari government didn't want to seem to be encouraging the learning of the Yuuzhan Vong language and wouldn't give Shaeri and C-3PO a room, Jaina, Tahiri, Anakin, and Jacen had then all turned to Han.
Who was unable to refuse any of them and caved almost immediately. Though, Han nearly pulled the plug on the Basic lessons when he accidently bumped into a Freed Yuuzhan Vong after one particular lesson, and the Intendant caste member responded with one of 3PO's patented 'Oh dear's in the exact same tone and syntax as the golden protocol droid.
All in all, things couldn't have been going any better for the Order. Which was why Anakin had been expecting bad news to arrive for quite some time.
Things never went this good.
So of course he had to be freshly out of the shower and wearing only a loose pair of pants, after a jam-packed day, when fate decided to kindly oblige his expectations.
With the sound of the shower running in the background—why Tahiri had to use the shower in his room and not the one in hers was beyond him—Anakin slung his towel over one of his shoulders and shifted through his HoloNet messages at a nearby desk. One message in particular stood out.
Anakin decided to play it on the holopad, and took a seat next to it as a miniature version of Ganner Rhysode appeared. *"Hey Anakin. I'm assuming that mother-of-all Force pulses last week was your fault. Not that I didn't like it, it was barvy. But, that's not why I'm calling. You*

know our fine Imperial neighbors we have? They've developed a major Vong infestation. And I mean major. I'm working with a secret task force headed up by a Moff Ephin Sarreti, and we've been unraveling one heck of a Vong spy network. We've managed to confirm that two other Moffs on the Council of Moffs have been compromised, and that a still mysterious shadow figure within Imperial Intelligence is pulling all the strings.
By now you're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this. Well, you see, the funny thing about these Imperials is that they'd rather go down fighting than ask for help from the Rebels. Fortunately, the guys I'm working with are a bit smarter. Since I've become somewhat of an honorary Imperial, they're perfectly fine with asking me for help. And, because I don't want to die, I'm perfectly fine asking you for help. So I'd appreciate any reinforcements you can send my way. Preferably before the next month is out because that's when my friends and I have discovered that a Yuuzhan Vong backed coup will take place.
As for your moving planet. I've found some evidence that it flirted around this area of space for a bit, but it's moved on. If anything, I bet the Chiss will know. The last known direction had Zonama heading towards their space. Sorry I couldn't be more of a help for that matter. Other than that, not much else is happening. Oh, and before I forget, I'm getting some gifts for the Myrkr team. Do you prefer Imperial Green, Imperial Black, or Imperial Khaki for your Imperial Officer's hat? It's all very Imperial over here. Hope to see you soon, great and fearless leader. Rhysode, out."
"Was that Ganner's voice I heard?" Tahiri said, emerging from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around herself. She began to rummage around in a cabinet where she had more or less moved all of her belongings too.
"Yeah," Anakin motioned to the holopad. "Apparently we'll be making a trip to the Imperial Remnant in the near future."
"Ah yes, the land of the cruel-to-the-feet, knee-high boot wearing people. Those poor, helplessly trapped feet," Tahiri said as she dropped her towel and began to shamelessly dress in front of Anakin, though not before she performed some exaggerated stretches. "Alema should love it there. She likes high boots and people in power. It's a good thing I still haven't completely unpacked from our trip to Tatooine."
"Uh huh," Anakin managed, his normally busy and well-organized mind temporarily losing track of its thought processes. *Stang, he was lucky.* Tahiri smiled slyly as she shrugged on a loose fitting shirt; which, Anakin belatedly realized, was one of his.

He gave her an ever-suffering shake of his head. She had been teasing him all day but he had been unable to act on any of his thoughts, much less think *those* thoughts, because they had also been surrounded by other Jedi for practically every minute. He smiled ruefully as he admired his girlfriend, her confidence just one of the many things he found attractive about her.
Even if that confidence was then used to drive him crazy.
With great effort, he managed to force himself back onto the matter at hand as went over Ganner's message once more. They did have a war to fight after all. "I'll probably run this by the High Council. They're meeting soon and the Imperial Remnant is a bit more important politically than the Hutts."
"They have their own fleet too. More help is always good." Tahiri tightened the cinch of her pants. She attached her old blue lightsaber to her belt, keeping her mother's safely in the wooden box on a nightstand by his bed.
"The only problem is, I don't think the non-Jedi portion of the High Council will want to do anything."
"Huh?" Tahiri moved over to him and bent forward to rest her chin on his shoulder. "Why not?"
He reached up and they briefly played with each other's hands. "When we needed their help, the Remnant stalled. Now that the Galactic Alliance has the momentum in the war, they won't see the need or the benefit in supporting them."
"That's kind of childish," Tahiri remarked.
"That's politics," Anakin said dryly. "Though, if they want to cover all their bases, Cal Omas might just send another token force."
The door chime rang.
"Come in!" Tahiri called out.
Jaina entered hesitantly. She saw the damp towel on the floor by the bed and averted her eyes from Tahiri and Anakin.
"You can look. We weren't doing anything not-kid friendly, Jaya," Anakin teased.
"Yet," Tahiri grinned predatorily.
"What's on your mind?" Anakin said, feeling very much like the prey as Tahiri encircled him with her arms. She was definitely spending too much time with Alema.
"Jag got word from his sister," Jaina smiled at their antics. "She might have a lead on Zonama Sekot. It might be nothing, but I thought I'd go with him to check it out."
"To Chiss space?"
"That's right."

"I just got a message from Ganner. Imperial star charts tracked Zonama until it disappeared in the direction of Chiss space," Anakin said.
"Oh? And how is Ganner doing?"
"He's joined a Black Ops group trying to root out a Vong spy network, and is single-handedly trying to stop the Empire from collapsing from political intrigue," Anakin deadpanned.
"Oh, typical Ganner business," Jaina replied in kind.
"Typical Ganner business," Anakin agreed. "Enjoy your trip to Chiss space. After I bring up Ganner's problem with the High Council, I'll probably be helping out the Remnant."
"Be careful you two," Jaina said, meeting and holding each of their gazes.
"You too, Jaina," Tahiri said, detaching herself from Anakin to hug her. Jaina returned the hug and then stepped back. Winking, she gave them both a wave as she took a step back towards the door. "Hey, all I'll be doing is looking at some Chiss star charts; a short, sweet, and uncomplicated trip to Csilla. What type of danger could I possibly run into?"
"Jaina, I said the same thing about my trip to the Sand People, look how that turned out," Tahiri said with a raised eyebrow.
Jaina stopped and blinked. "Good point. But really, there shouldn't be anything difficult about this trip. The Chiss have managed to stay out of the war so far, the Yuuzhan Vong are ignoring them for now, and with everything going on in the rest of the galaxy, it's probably one of the safest places I could travel to. You guys just worry about yourselves, you're the ones going back to the frontlines."
"We will, Jaya," Anakin said solemnly, then cracked a small smile. "Enjoy your trip with Jag."
Jaina grinned in turn and resumed her trip through the door, giving them a brief two-fingered wave in parting. "Oh I will."
When Jaina left, Tahiri tilted her head towards the door. "Go on and tell the High Council about the situation. I'll get packed up then say goodbye to the *Veila*. It's too bad she's not ready for space flight."
"Yeah, it would have been nice to see how she flies. And I'll tell the council of Ganner's problem. But, first things first," Anakin shut down the holopad. Turning his body, he pulled Tahiri onto his lap and kissed her. He pulled back slightly, resting his forehead against hers. "You're not very nice."
"Oh?" Tahiri shifted, straddling him and resting her arms on his shoulder, as she tilted her head with a knowing grin.

"Do you know how hard it is for me to keep my thoughts shielded when I'm giving lessons to a room full of Jedi?" Anakin said, his voice deeper than usual as he struggled to control himself.
"I have some idea," Tahiri grinned impishly, her weight shifting on his lap.
Anakin groaned. "Tahiri."
"Complaining Solo?"
Anakin wisely shook his head and decided to kiss her instead. Tahiri was all too happy to reciprocate his affections. The past week had kept the both of them busy beyond anything they thought possible. They spent most of their waking moments teaching different groups of Jedi and Galactic Alliance Intel personnel about the Yuuzhan Vong, had separate break times, and any free time was then devoted to conferring with politicians and older Jedi about how to better fight the war. Even when the day was done, they had both been too tired to do little more than collapse into the bed and go to sleep.
It was a testament as to how busy they truly were when a couple small messages sent through their Force bond had been all they shared by way of affection in the past five days. While that was sufficient for conveying general feelings of love and support, it was a poor replacement to what they had gotten used to during their time together on Tatooine.
And as strong as the both of them were, they were both still teenagers, still human, and very much feeding off of each other's desires and emotions. Once more fighting in the war, they were again reminded of how their time together was a luxury they rarely had, and they were determined to make the best of what they got.
But of course, since they *were* supposed to be focusing on the war effort, they had to be just a little responsible as well.
"Remember, play nice with the people on the High Council," Tahiri said, between kisses. "They're just politicians, so no getting your feelings hurt by what they say. And no hurting their feelings either by coming up with plans to solve a problem that their collective brains weren't able to."
"Uh huh. Good thing the High Council meeting isn't for another hour. Plenty of time to think of a backup plan."
"Uh huh." Tahiri let out a soft groan, his hands expertly working beneath the loose-fitting shirt she had only recently put on. After a few moments, the shirt flew through the air and landed somewhere in the room. "To think, and to…to…oh!"
Anakin stood, her legs wrapping around him instinctively and his lean muscles flexing as he supported her weight. Continuing to kiss her

senseless as her own hands absently roamed his body, he walked them over from the desk to the bed. He lowered her back down, breathing heavily as he admired her smaller form with almost hungry blue eyes. She looked back up at him with flushed cheeks. "I don't think what we're about to do is kid-friendly."
"Definitely not," Anakin whispered against her lips. "Any objections?"
"You're talking too much, kiss me already."
Needless to say, as responsible as he was trying to be, he nearly missed the High Council meeting.
=}VII{= =}VII{=
"We simply do not have the resources to spare," Supreme Commander Sien Sovv, head of the Galactic Alliance fleets said, nodding at the still hologram of Ganner Rhysode. Anakin's proposal was the last issue of the day, but the importance of it was not lost on the other members of the High Council. "We have only just begun to turn the tide in this war and need all available ships just to hold the lines. As it is, the Hutt Space incident freed up many of our vessels and they were moved to shore up our other forces all along the frontlines."
"That is not to say we are not empathetic with your concern for the Imperial Remnant," Minister of State Releqy A'kla said, her fur shimmering. "Were it possible, we would provide aid."
"There is the fact that the Senate would be decidedly negative to any suggestion that we provide aid to a group that rebuffed our pleas for help," Chief of State Cal Omas added.
"We have to win the war here before we help a distant government on the fringes of this galaxy," non-voting member, former Peace Brigade Commander General Jartre Rinmek, tossed in his own objection.
"Then you will not mind if the Jedi acted unilaterally for this?" Anakin said, well-prepared for their response.
"The Jedi?" Cal Omas was taken aback.
"Under the Galactic Alliance charter, the Jedi Order was given the same status as Hapes, or the Hutts. Though we serve in an advisory and guardianship role for this government, we also retain our autonomy and ability to act freely; so long as those actions do not jeopardize the greater peace of this galaxy," Anakin reminded. "Politically, the Jedi answers to this council and only this council, not the Senate. All we need is the approval of those in this room, and we can go and aid the Remnant."
Cal Omas blinked and briefly checked with the non-Jedi members of the council through a visual vote. He then nodded slowly. "That could work."

"It is clear you already have a plan in mind, young Jedi. Can you please share it with us?" One of the newer members of the council, Minister of Justice and Director of Intelligence pro tem, Ta'laam Ranth asked politely.
"Since the Imperial Remnant probably won't be too happy with a Galactic Alliance fleet dropping out of hyperspace in their territory anyway, I propose we send only a couple of vessels. Unless there aren't any objections from the Jedi members of this council," Anakin motioned to Kyp, Corran, Jacen, and the others. "One of the Jedi Masters can lead this diplomatic mission to assess the state of the Remnant. If the Remnant does appear to be learning towards an alliance with the Yuuzhan Vong, it is in the Galactic Alliance's best interest to know as soon as possible. The team will meet up with Ganner Rhysode and we'll go from there."
"I'll defer this to my esteemed Jedi colleagues," Cal Omas ceded the decision to Anakin's superiors.
"We approve of the basic idea," Corran said, announcing the mental consensus of the Jedi portion of the council. "After this session is over, we'll meet to discuss the finer details."
"Very well," Cal Omas said. "You have the blessing of the Galactic Alliance."
"Thank you, Chief of State," Anakin bowed politely. "And thank you, members of the High Council for taking the time to hear me."
"[It was either that or get a heart attack after learning that you've already incorporated the Remnant into the Galactic Alliance]," the Wookie senator, Triebakk, said in good humor. "[The diplomatic corps likes to plan their conversations. They are not particularly fond of you for the Hutt Empire incident. They were forced to make some concessions they wouldn't have normally made due to the impromptu nature of those discussions.]"
"Can't be popular with everyone," Kyp shrugged.
"I try," Anakin said sheepishly. "Thanks again."
"For you, young Solo, any time," Releqy A'kla inclined her head. "This galaxy owes you much."
"If it can stay in one piece without breaking down for a good decade or so, I'd be happy."
"I think we'd all be, little brother," Jacen said with a smile. "At this point, I'll take even a few *months* of peace."

=}VIII{= =}VIII{=

Lightyears away, Tyria Sarkin Tainer was wondering if the Force hated her. After setting the *Kell Dragon* down for a refueling and resupply mission on the planet Galantos—a planet that recently repelled a

Yuuzhan Vong invasion thanks to the efforts of Jedi Master Tresina, Knights Zekk, Lowbacca, and Tesar, and a Galactic Alliance battle group—a Ryn just happened to be waiting for them with a message. Given how much the Ryn had helped at Bakura—and elsewhere, if reports from the various teams of Jedi could be believed—Tyria just knew that the message couldn't be good.

She was right.

The Ryn had learned of a Yuuzhan Vong fleet massing at Bandomeer with no other apparent purpose but to attack Mandalore. Which of course didn't make sense as the Mandalorians were supposed to be Yuuzhan Vong allies. Or at least pretending to be.

Either the game was up and the Yuuzhan Vong had seen through the ruse, or the Yuuzhan Vong were getting desperate for a victory. Mandalore wasn't a part of the Galactic Alliance. It was an isolated system and still within Yuuzhan Vong held space. Sure attacking it was akin to suicide, but it would probably be a lot easier than attacking any one of the Galactic Alliance's positions at the moment. Especially with the Freed Ones reinforcing many of the weakened positions.

In any case, the Mandalorians needed to be warned.

Tyria shook her head at the datapad at that very idea. The Mandalorians were the exemplar of a professional army. She was an unconventional Jedi with two teenagers in tow. The idea of them going up to knock on Mandalore's door and to warn him of a potential threat, based off of information they had retrieved from wandering space nomads, was laughable. Nevertheless, her duty as a Jedi couldn't just let the Mandalorians be ambushed by this massing Vong fleet. It was a good thing she and Doran had spent a year among them at the start of the war. At least they would have *some* credibility.

"Hi mom," Doran said brightly, climbing back onboard with one of his hands gripping one of Sannah's. They had become closer, if that was possible, since Bakura. A near brush with entechment tech would have done that to anyone. "What's wrong?"

"The Ryn," Tyria said with a deep sigh, handing over the datapad the Ryn agent had given her.

"The Ryn, again?" Sannah read the datapad over Doran's shoulder.

"Mandalore?" Doran's eyebrows shot up. "We're going to Mandalore?"

"Or wherever their leader is," Tyria said. "How's your Mando'a?"

"*Ni ruhibira teh te jatnese,"* Doran said, rolling his eyes. *I learned from the best.*

"I never knew you knew Mando'a," Sannah tilted her head questioningly.

"Mom made me learn a couple of the warrior languages of this galaxy. When the war's over, she'll probably make me learn Yuuzhan Vong too." Doran tried to brush it off as if it was no big deal. "Apparently, with most of the warrior races, you gain more respect in their eyes if you can speak their tongue. I mean, the Force helps you understand them, but they're more likely to help you and less likely to kill you if you know their language. My Mando'a is still rusty though. Haven't had to use it since the phobium mines on Gargon, almost three years ago."
"You didn't tell me about that adventure," Sannah blinked.
"It wasn't much of one, really. The war had only just broken out and Mandalorian space was still safe because of the treaty they had made. Mom took me there for a year's worth of training with the Mandalorians. It was actually pretty neat since the Mandos consider you an adult at thirteen. Once there all I did was…" Doran trailed off, a spike of guilt escaping his suddenly tightly controlled emotional shields as his face flushed. "Oh Sithspit."
"Doran?" Sannah was taken aback by his reaction. He seemed both embarrassed and nervous.
"So mom, when do we leave?" Doran said quickly, unable to meet Sannah's eyes.
Tyria took the datapad back from him and took pity on him. Gargon was one of the few planets he had fond memories of, mostly due to the friendships he had formed there. One of those friendships in particular may add a complication to his budding relationship with Sannah. "As soon as the *Dragon* is ready to go. The Ryn don't know when the Vong fleet will attack so the sooner we warn the Mandalorians, the better."
"Right, umm…" Doran closed his eyes, pained, as a variety of conflicting feelings crossed his mind. "I guess…" He looked to Sannah again, his expression pleading for her to understand something. "I guess I'll tell Dinua that I'm coming back."
"She'll be happy to see you again," Tyria said softly.
"Dinua?" Sannah said in a quiet voice. Despite his attempts to shield his emotions, she could still sense that he felt strongly about this person. "She's like Alex, right? Just another one of those people who help you out with adventures?"
Doran swallowed and shook his head. "Not really. She was my training partner assigned to me on Gargon. We weren't the best of friends at first, but…well…we warmed up to each other. When I left, we…we weren't exactly a couple; but we were kind of more than best friends."
Sannah stood gripping the back of Doran's chair in silence. Neither teen noticed Tyria move to the back of the ship to give the two of them privacy.

"Sannah?"
"It's okay," Sannah whispered in a quiet voice, her own emotional barriers going up. "It's good that you have someone else. I mean, in five years I'll have to return to Yavin Eight and live out the rest of my life there anyways. It's better if you, you know, forget about me and be with someone who can…"
"Fish-Girl!" Doran spun out of his chair and gripped both of her hands.
"It's okay," Sannah repeated, looking away.
"Fish-Girl," Doran gave both her hands a squeeze and dropped his own emotional barriers. "Sannah. You'll always be my bestest and closest friend, no matter if you grow fins and gills and develop a permanent taste for kelp and fish. And I thought we already established that we're boyfriend–girlfriend now?"
"But you shouldn't waste your feelings on me for some short-term relationship," Sannah shook her hands free and spun in her chair to face away from him. "You should be with another human, at least. Someone you can spend the rest of your life with."
"Since when have I done anything I actually 'should'?" Doran said helplessly, flinching at the misery he could hear in her voice. "Even if I did get together with some other girl, you and I have something I can never have with anyone else; a Force-bond stronger than anything. Sure you'll become a fish. But I'll just have to build a lake-side house on Yavin Eight and set up a training camp for any Jedi-spawn you eventually have. No matter how short or long a time we have together, we'll always be friends and partners."
Sannah looked down at her feet and wrung her hands, sniffling as she did. "Promise?" One of the downsides to her metamorphosis was that she'd have to leave all of her friends, all of the adventures, everything she had done in her human form, behind. It was a bleak thought that Sannah tried not to think about, but growing up also meant growing one step closer to leaving her best friend for good.
"Easiest promise I'll ever make, Fish-Girl," Doran said, falling back into his chair and pulling Sannah onto his lap.
"You really don't have to make a lake-side house," Sannah whispered, her yellow eyes luminescent as one of his hands tilted her head back. "Just drop by from time to time. You know, to let me know how everyone is?"
"Hey, I'll need a place to retire to when I decide to become one of those Force-crazed hermits," Doran said, their noses just brushing. He let one finger wipe away the stray tear that had escaped.
Sannah managed a small giggle. "I can definitely see you as one."
"Thanks a lot," Doran said flatly.

"Are you going to kiss me now?" Sannah whispered.
"Yeah," Doran lowered his lips to hers.
They parted and Sannah's eyes fluttered back open. Lowering her eyes, she said almost hesitantly. "Can you tell me about her?"
"Dinua?"
"Uh huh," Sannah nodded. "What's she like?"
And as Doran finally began talking about the details of his training mission on Gargon, Tyria re-emerged feeling both proud and amused at her son. Doran had definitely inherited his father's goofy nature, but also his ability to be serious when he had to. Of course, like his father, Doran had somehow mastered the ability to be both goofy and serious at the same time. Tyria was once again glad that Sannah was along for the ride. There was only so much goofy-serious Tyria could take before going insane.
Seeing the fuel gauge full, Tyria began the pre-flight sequence, once again wondering just what was in store for them this time.
=}IX{= =}IX{=
"Twin Suns Four, ready for the jump to hyperspace," Anakin acknowledged as the task-force, unofficially called the 'Save-the-Remnant-From-Becoming-an-Even-Smaller-Remnant-of-a-Remnant rescue force,'—so named due to a drunken brain storming session by Han, Kyle, Jaden, the Wraiths, and Kyp—emerged from Mon Calamari's gravity shadow.
"Twin Suns Five, ready and waiting," one of the members in Anakin's shield-trio, Alema Rar, acknowledged.
"Six, is ready too. Let's go save the Imperials," Tahiri said energetically, rounding out the abbreviated Twin Suns squadron.
The many differences between a military run operation and a Jedi run operation were made clear almost immediately. For one, no ship in the taskforce was of standard design. The token Galactic Alliance vessel, the *Pride of Selonia*, was a heavily modified Lancer-class frigate designed to carry all six X-wings of Wraith Squadron—which had two new recruits to make up for the absence of Bhindi Drayson and Baljos Arnjak. In addition to the *Pride of Selonia*, the *Raven's Claw*, carrying Jaden Kor's Z-95 Headhunter clamped to the bottom, was joined by the *Pulsar Skate*, *Jade Shadow, Errant Venture*, and the infamous *Millennium Falcon.*
Even the fighter squadrons coming on the mission, right down to the flightsuits of the pilots, were irregular. Heavily customized X-wings belonging to Kyp's Dozen flew alongside Waxarn Kel's Death Knights' own black-painted ones; while the Twin Suns were once again led by the shield-trio of Luke, Mara, and Corran. Kyp's Dozen wore light red

colored versions of the standard Alliance flightsuit, the Death Knights wore a burgundy red, and the Twin Suns wore the standard orange. To emphasize the Jedi-led aspect of this mission, only the *Pride of Selonia* bore any markings to connect it to the Galactic Alliance. All other fighters and ships had a temporary insignia of the Jedi Order. In all, the mission was definitely mishmash in both vehicles and personalities.

Though the mission was originally only going to include the younger Jedi Knights and maybe one or two Masters, the plan had expanded exponentially. The idea of the first, truly sanctioned, Jedi-only mission, with the Jedi Order assuming full control, appealed to a great many of the others. More so, since the meld that the Solo children had created had brought the myriad of Jedi together.

"You know, we're really not going to impress the nit-picky Imperials with our rag-tag fleet," Han Solo's voice said lightly over the comm-channel. *"These are the type of people that have to grow even their plants in neat little rows."*

"Hey, the Rebel Alliance had a rag-tag fleet that didn't impress them either," Kyle Katarn pointed out jovially. *"A few weeds now and then can't hurt."*

"I don't know what I think about being a weed," Corran protested with good cheer.

"Nothing wrong about being a weed. They're like us Wraiths, they can pop out of anywhere and they can grow on you," Elassar Targon of Wraith Squadron objected.

"That settles it," Mirax's voice came over the comm line. *"There should be a definite limit on the number of Jedi-organized strike forces. Especially if Wraith Squadron invites themselves along."*

"Finally!" Jan Ors said in mock relief. *"Someone else who understands my pain."*

"I told you a support group for the non-Jedi- significant-other of Jedi was needed," Kell Tainer said sagely, as if it was the best idea in the entire universe.

"So you want a group called the No-Jay-Soo-Jay?" Mara blinked at the acronym.

"We'll let Kyle, Kyp, and Jaden come up with the name. They're sooo good at it," Kell replied happily.

"Aren't you guys supposed to be the adults on this mission?" Tahiri asked in confusion.

"Oh no, we're just going along for the ride," Kyp chimed in. *"This mission's all you next gen-Jedi's responsibility. It was Anakin's idea after all."*

"Great, we're baby-sitting full grown kids," Alema deadpanned.
Anakin, in the meantime, hung his head in defeat. "And we can't even send them to their room."
"I've felt like doing that to numerous Jedi on more than one occasion," Luke admitted with a laugh.
Through the banter, Luke Skywalker couldn't keep the genuine grin off his face. For once the Order was truly in harmony and operating at its peak efficiency. Never could he imagine Kyp Durron, Waxarn Kel, and so many others of differing opinions, actually working together on a single mission. He himself was actually looking forward to working with them, rather than cringing in the expectation of the arguments and disagreements that had plagued the Order since the start of the war. The Jedi was truly growing into their place in the galaxy, and he couldn't be more proud of his niece and nephews for making that possible.
And the Jedi weren't the only ones finding their place. The Galactic Alliance was able to spare so many Jedi on this mission because the Supreme Council of the Free Yuuzhan Vong had stepped up their efforts to end the war. A stunned, bewildered, and completely baffled Taan had sat completely numbed in surprise when the Freed Yuuzgan Vong Council unanimously selected her to be their first leader and representative of their race. With her leadership, the council then went on to reaffirm their commitment to the philosophies followed by the Jedi.
Luke found it amazing how the Free Yuuzhan Vong adapted these philosophies and merged them into their own interpretation of the True Way; the religion that had been twisted by Shimrra and the priestly caste.
Though the 'Save the Remnant' taskforce was relatively small and unimpressive, a fleet of five Free Yuuzhan Vong capital ships stood ready to jump in if they were needed. They would have accompanied the 'Save the Remnant' taskforce, but it was generally agreed that the Imperial Remnant might have a very bad reaction to seeing Yuuzhan Vong warships in orbit above their capital planet. So, to avoid any misunderstandings, the ships would remain just outside of Remnant space.
"*Twin Suns squadron is ready,"* Mara Jade Skywalker confirmed, ending the check-list for the taskforce. She was aboard the *Jade Shadow,* her X-wing clamped to the ship's hull, transporting some of the Jedi apprentices who were likewise coming on the mission.
"*All units, prepare to jump to hyperspace on my mark."*
"*See you all at Bastion."* Kyp acknowledged.

"*Mark.*"
With that, the 'Save-the-Remnant-From-Becoming-an-Even-Smaller-Remnant-of-a-Remnant rescue force,' leapt forward, away from Mon Calamari, and onto the next adventure.
Little did they know that for many, it would be their last.
=}-{= Chapter End =}-{=
A\N: Probably my most favorite (and longest) chapter to write by far. The previous Force Heretic 'book' can be compared to the *New Hope* in that it was all positive with heroes doing their thing and bad guys losing big time. Be prepared for a darker Yuuzhan Vong *Empire Strikes Back* segment of the trilogy, both in tone and content (think the deleted scene for the raid-on-Gorga's-base dark). This also means that in the next arcs, romance scenes will become few and far apart as the war really picks up and gets a lot more serious. So, for those who have been worried that everything has been going *too* well, try not to be so eager to want misfortune on the no longer deceased Solo. By next Interlude things will be decidedly different...
The Imps and Chiss will fill up two of the three main arcs of Book 2 as the war spreads to the distant corners of the galaxy. The Imp plot is nine chapters long, and the Chiss plot is five, both will faintly resemble their canon arcs, but at the same time have enough tweaks that they can be considered original story arcs as well.
And yes, if anyone missed it or are still doubting their eyes, the Mandos will feature heavily in a multi-part fifteen chapter original story arc with Doran and Sannah's biggest adventure yet. The arc will span both Book 2 and 3 and will build on the events of Traviss' NJO e-book, *Boba Fett: A Practical Man*. So, get ready for an even wilder ride as we begin a march towards the second half of this monster of a tale.